



# The Herbalist

*Niamh Boyce*

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## **The Herbalist** Niamh Boyce

*The Herbalist* is the electrifying first novel from Niamh Boyce, winner of the 2012 Hennessy XO Award for New Irish Writing. It is a devastating and emotional story of yearning and obsession in 1930s rural Ireland.

Out of nowhere the herbalist appears and sets up his stall in the market square. Teenager Emily is spellbound by the exotic stranger - here is a man of the world who won't care that she's not respectable. However, Emily has competition for the herbalist's attentions. It seems the women of her small town are all mesmerized by the visitor who, they say, can perform miracles. When Emily discovers the miracle-worker's dark side, her world turns upside down. She may be naive, but she has a fierce sense of right and wrong. With his fate lying in her hands, Emily must make the biggest decision of her young life. To make the herbalist pay for his sins against the women of the town? Or let him escape to cast his spell on another place?

## **The Herbalist Details**

Date : Published June 6th 2013 by Penguin Ireland (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN : 9781844883042

Author : Niamh Boyce

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Cultural, Ireland, European Literature, Irish Literature, Literature, 20th Century

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## From Reader Review The Herbalist for online ebook

### Canadian Reader says

This was a potentially interesting story of rural Ireland in the 1930s. When a herbalist arrives in a small town, the women flock to him (many secretly), hoping he'll cure what ails them. In fact, he is a back-room abortionist. There are elements of magic realism: for example, the ghost of a girl (who died from a botched procedure) visits the scorned town prostitute, a reader of fortunes and an occasional spiritualist. There are far too many dalliances, affairs, rapes, incest, and pregnancies, which weigh the book down in sappy melodrama. Not worth your while.

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### Dem says

#### 3.5 Stars

The Herbalist by Niamh Boyce

Set in the 1930s in a small town in Ireland The Herbalist is a simple and compelling story, excellently well crafted with subtle detail and exquisite prose that will keep you turning the pages of this beautifully written novel.

It is hard to believe that this is Niamh Boyce's first novel as she really captures the mood of 1930s Ireland and I loved the contrast between the town and country girls and good and evil. I have read a lot of books set in Ireland around this time and I think Niamh Boyce has a unique ability to capture the reader's attention with her storytelling.

The story centres on a small town where the usual gossip occurs between the shop keepers and the customers and where some of the town folk think the country folk are beneath them. A town where very little seems to happen until a mysterious exotic man appears out of nowhere and sets up his stall in the square, his appearance in the town livens things up with his lotions and potions and the ladies of the town from young to old become mesmerized by this visitor who they say can perform miracles.

I loved the cover of this novel as it just seems to draw you in and in itself tells a story of 1930s Ireland.

The characters are well drawn and each has her own story to tell. I loved that many of the female character were strong women who were easy to relate to. There seemed to be an absence of "catholic Ireland of the time" in the novel. Which I think would have dealt with the herbalist long before he made himself comfortable in the town and if not a parish priest would have chastised the women concerned from the alter.

I think this novel gives a great sense of social history of the time and I especially loved the reference to films showing at the local picture.

Our book club has chosen this as our January read and having read the book I think it will make an excellent book club read as there is plenty of discussion and much to admire about the author's writing. This is one I am looking forward to group discussion.

A well written and enjoyable read and I for one will look forward to Niamh Boyce's next novel.

Niamh was named the 2012 Hennessy XO New Irish Writer of the Year.

*My thanks to Penguin Ireland for sending me this novel to review.*

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### **Heather says**

3.5/4

Not sure what I feel about this. Loved the idea but not so much the execution of this story.

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### **Jan says**

I found this a very frustrating book, things were being alluded to all the time and then it finished at such a pace that you felt you were being pushed out the door while the last few pieces were falling into place and I found it absolutely unbelievable that a book that was set in the 1930s in Ireland and was telling a story about this dark skinned man setting up shop and having loads of female visitors at all hours of the day and night and yet not one visit from a local priest!!!! It just didnt do it for me, only saving grace was how things turned out for Emily.

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### **Cora Tea Party Princess says**

A very easy four stars. Almost five.

This story starts slow and builds and builds and builds. It is fantastically written and the prose is so lyrical that it felt at times as though I were reading a poem. The writing itself grows and by the end you feel as though you're reading a different book entirely.

It is mysterious and shocking, with threads of romance woven through. The little town has just as much of a little mind, is judgemental and closed and old-fashioned even for the times. It's a poisonous little place.

At first I found it a little difficult to differentiate between the different narratives, but it soon became easy, the voices became so much more distinct once I better knew the characters.

I love poisonous relationships. And this book has plenty. Whether it's romance or family, or the twisted small-town community relationships, they're great in this book.

Emily was the character that got to me the most. It's like she aged all of a sudden, yet at the same time it was so slow and subtle. She was infuriating and more than a little silly, but she grew up and did the right thing.

I felt so sorry for Sarah and only wish I hadn't been drip-fed the information so slowly. But at the same time it was right for the pacing of the story.

This is a book that would quite easily help me pass a long, slow summer's day.

*I received a copy of this for free via NetGalley for review purposes.*

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## **Stephanie Davies says**

I won my copy of 'The Herbalist' through a Goodreads First Reads competition and was immediately struck by how much the cover looked like that of 'Call the Midwife'. I don't believe this choice was accidental. The texts share a common thread; both novels are historical fictions that pertain to women's bodies, and both have a heavy religious presence.

'The Herbalist' is the story of a small group of women in 1930s Ireland. It details how the seemingly trivial appearance of a charming foreigner, who enters their market square one day to pedal his miraculous wares, changes their lives forever. It's a novel about social convention, secrecy and seduction. Each woman is faced with her own choice to make and burden to bear, sometimes with disastrous consequences.

Overall, this was a treat of a debut, and I feel that Boyce will only improve with any subsequent novels she may write. I was given an early review copy so I am unsure how much of the plot has changed with the book's actual release, but the text felt a bit unpolished. All of the components for a great story are here but I feel as if certain parts have been chopped out and not entirely erased; the dregs are still there.

For instance, I don't know if it's just me hopelessly wishing for a lesbian subplot in an historical fiction, but I feel like there were two brief mentions of Carmel's Sapphic nature: the first, when Emily sees her through the shop window and Carmel is transfixed by Sarah's smooth lovely skin, or something, and later at the drunken dinner party, when one of her lifelong friends calls her an 'invert' and both ladies are speechless and horror-stricken. I feel like these parts might point to a larger story that was hastily removed -- especially in the context of Carmel's relationship (or lack thereof) with her husband.

I am also unsure about Boyce's choice of narrative technique. Two of the central women are treated to first person narratives, and two are in the third. It's a brave experiment, but one that's a little bit hard to follow -- especially in the first few chapters. It would perhaps have worked better if each girl had a distinct 'voice', like the local prostitute Aggie, who gets a handful of her own chapters towards the end of the book. Saying that, though, young Emily is a great presence in the novel and definitely the strongest character. Kind of like a teenage Scout from 'To Kill a Mockingbird'.

My particular favourite part of the story was the mention of a kind of banned books black market that Carmel helps to orchestrate. I would have liked to see this explored a bit more, or at least experienced some of the characters reactions to 'Moll Flanders'!

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## **Margaret Madden says**

What a fab book. This lady can really write !!  
Highly recommended!!!!  
see my full review below

<http://bleachhouselibrary.blogspot.ie...>

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## Theresa Milstein says

The Herbalist is written in the point of view of 4 women. 2 are written in the first person and 2 are in the third person. I didn't find it jarring. It was divided by chapter and the voices were distinctive.

The fact that Niamh Boyce is also a poet who has won awards is clear when reading The Herbalist. As I read the book, I felt as if an impressionist painting was being revealed stroke by stroke. The three questions on the cover stayed in the back of my mind as I watched 3 women's lives unfold: Who will receive mercy? Who will have hope? Who will fall to ruin?

Emily seems like the main character. She's an unreliable narrator. I couldn't help but feel for her and admire her spirit, even when she made poor decisions. Though her erratic actions sometimes bothered me, they felt true to her character. Same with Carmel. She too had a sad story, but her situation didn't justify much of her behavior. I don't think it was Niamh's intention to excuse it either. Aggie, a prostitute, had a minor role early on, but her value illuminated as the story unfolded. The final character (Sophie? - I don't have the book in front of me and I'm terrible with names!) touched me the most. I also had issues with several of her choices, but understood them in the larger context of her situation.

There are other characters, all written with the same depth and intrigue.

The Herbalist comes to town, creating a stir with his exotic appearance and big promises. He intrigues the women of the town in different ways. But there's a darker side to his offerings.

Emily wants love.

Carmel wants a baby.

Sophie originally wants love, but her needs alter over the course of the story.

So much of what happens to the women, their reactions, and the consequences are dictated by 1930s Catholic Ireland. It becomes clear that sexual oppression and rigid women's roles leads to much of the unfortunate unfolding of these women's fates. When women don't have power or control over their own desires or bodies, the consequences are dire.

I couldn't help but think of The Casual Vacancy by J.K. Rowling, even though these are such different books. Rowling also created a small town where the fate of a few was much fueled by the culture and judgement of the neighbors. But where Rowling made just about each character unlikable, Niamh's characters feel more thoughtfully written. Rowling also had too many points of view, which made it hard for me to identify with any of the characters. Niamh Boyce's use of 4 characters is just enough to make me feel as if I knew each one well. She also was able to get at the story from a variety of angles, making the plot more interesting.

Even when I wasn't reading the The Herbalist, it stayed with me. And hours after I've finished the book, I'm still thinking of the women.

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## Melinda says

*The Herbalist* is a riveting story taking place in 1930's Ireland. The Herbalist sets up shop in a small village

bringing much more than herbs and cures.

The women of the small village are smitten by this charming attractive man with his promised potions, the men suspicious, little do they know this peddler is a predator and a murder. He does much more than cure or push elixirs he erases secrets.

Enthralling story of love, rape, incest, murder and loss, let's not omit courage. One brave young woman Emily, risks her reputation exposing the man she has 'feelings' for - the herbalist. Shunned by the town, brave, bold and loyal Emily faces the herbalist on her murdered friends behalf as well as for the safety of her fellow womenfolk, not to mention the morality aspect.

Boyce created a Payton Place with a variety of characters and circumstances. Religion, abortion sex, and status create a great narrative. The main protagonists are all women with varying personalities, a few you'll adore, a few you'll despise. Weak, strong, immoral, pious they all create an interesting and entertaining backdrop.

A few angles of the story will move the reader, very vivid in description causing the reader to feel an array of emotions. I was extremely moved by the narrative in countless ways. Boyce had no problem drawing my attention and emotions.

I enjoyed *The Herbalist*, the writing, characters and narrative formed quite a page turner. A great historical fiction taking place in Ireland during the 1930's, a deeply moving and powerful novel. I highly suggest *The Herbalist*

*Penguin Books provided a copy in exchange for an honest review*

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## **Sheena Lambert says**

Just to be clear: I loved this book.

But, being totally honest, I found the first chapter or two "unexciting". So much so, that I picked up another book to read instead. I did intend giving *The Herbalist* another go, and when my book club chose it as our book du jour, I was delighted to have a reason to pick it up again.

And I am SO glad I did.

It's a very different style of book to any I've read before. The author's voice reminds me a little of a female Donal Ryan (*The Spinning Heart*) and if you liked his books, I would suggest that you would really enjoy *The Herbalist*.

Again, being honest, I was put off by the chapters being given to an individual character and titled as such - that's just a personal bugbear - but there was something about the same characters that kept me reading, even through the third quarter, where I felt the story stagnated a little, just briefly. But this book is less about story, and more about characters in my view, and the author does such a genuinely fantastic job of drawing individual, interesting ones, that I think I would have wanted to read about them whether a herbalist had ever arrived into their lives or not.

A really great first novel.

PS general consensus from book club was that it was a really enjoyable read.

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## Soaraway says

I found it really difficult to get into this novel. The character development was rather weak, especially the development of character relationships. It's ok to have a weak character but not a weakly developed character. Emily's relationship with the Herbalist and his with her seems implausible. The characters just weren't developed enough to make it believable. Also, there were other aspects of the book that were just not developed enough. What happened with Rose could have been so compelling but because of inadequate character development I as reader just didn't have enough of a relationship with her to care. And Sarah's situation offered the opportunity for an unexpected twist but when her experience is finally revealed it is so predictable and boring I actually rolled my eyes. I only continued the book out of curiosity as to what would happen to the characters but the only one whose fate was something of a surprise was Sarah's. And that was mild at best.

But I didn't hate the book, just found it very poorly written, which is why it merited two stars instead of just one.

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## Tracy G says

Firstly, this is a brilliantly written first novel by new Irish author from Kildare - Niamh Boyce. Inspired by a 1940's newspaper clipping about a herbalist arrested for crimes against young girls, Boyce deals with the hypocrisy and closed-mindedness of early twentieth century Ireland. Actually you could argue, that where the treatment of women is concerned, things haven't progressed as much as one would have hoped. One only has to read the UN's review of Ireland's compliance with the ICCPR where committee members severely criticise Ireland's treatment of women and children, in the past and now; how Irish women are being denied human rights and how they are being abandoned by a State that stigmatises them, treats them as criminals and forces them to leave their country for health services denied to them. Damning yet true. Anyway, in Boyce's novel 1930's Ireland was a dangerous place for our four leading ladies, all of whom become consumed in some way by the dark stranger who moves quietly into their town, their heads and in some cases, their bodies. The women are a mixture of strength, resolve, resentment, suspicion and vulnerability and despite the confusion of the opening chapters, I eventually grew to understand and relate to their predicaments. There is such a sinister undertone to this novel, a reality that is disturbingly complex and hard to accept. The book is interesting and gripping but at times the prose submits to the poetic principle of 'show don't tell' so we are left hanging with incomplete and unfinished details and descriptions and more questions than answers. On the whole though - a good read - it's encouraging to see this calibre of writing coming out of the country.

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## Jane Meagher says

A bit of a slow burner but totally unputdownable for a finish

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## Anne says

Set in a small town in Ireland during the 1930s, The Herbalist is an evocative and beautifully written portrayal of life during that time.

The story is narrated in turn by four women; Emily, Carmel, Sarah and Aggie. Four very different women, who each speak with a very different voice, but who are all connected by the arrival of 'The Herbalist' to their market square.

The pace of the story is slow, and gentle, with each woman's tale explored in detail. The hidden secrets, the treatment of women and the impact of decisions come together to create a novel that, despite the almost poetic language at times, is really a look at the harsh reality of those times.

The depth of emotion is breathtaking at times, this is a heart-felt story that exposes the lack of choice of women in 1930s Ireland, and the treatment of those who did not conform.

I have no doubt that The Herbalist is the start of a magnificent writing career for Niamh Boyce

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## **Marleen says**

“You wouldn't know it but it's my story. You won't find me in the column inches. You won't find me in the newsprint. You'll find me in the gaps, the commas, the full stops – the small dark spaces where one thing led to another.”

Although the quote above relates specifically to one of the characters in this book, it is an accurate description for the whole book. This story is told with as much eloquence through everything that isn't spelled out as it is through the words on the pages.

This story tells the tale of a small town in Ireland during a hot summer late in the 1930's. It shows us the events that slowly, deceptively but steadily led towards heartbreak and destruction after two strangers arrive in town.

The first stranger was Don Vikram Fernandez, a dark-skinned travelling herbalist. Although he is looked at with suspicion by almost everyone in the town when he first arrives it isn't long before, especially the town's women, find that the potions and lotions he has on offer are something they can't live without.

The only person to immediately take to Don Vikram is young Emily. Seventeen years young and having just lost her mother, Emily is an adventurous and romantic spirit. Although most people in town look down on her, Emily refuses to let that get her down or destroy her dreams. Young and lonely as she is it doesn't take a lot of the herbalist's attention or many of his enticing fantasies to make the girl believe herself deeply in love with him and him with her.

The second stranger is Sarah. Having been raised in the country-side by her midwife aunt after her mother died in childbirth, Sarah finds herself transported into the town after the school-master, her secret boyfriend's father, arranges a job for her there in his sister's shop. The night before she leaves her aunt's house, a big party is held in her honour; a party that will have far reaching consequences for Sarah and for the town she's about to move to.

Carmel owns the shop where Sarah is about to start working. Having just lost her much longed for son in a still-birth, Carmel is deeply unhappy and more than ready to retreat into her bedroom to nurse her depression and read her kinky and forbidden novels. Ignoring her much younger husband as well as her shop and home will have far-reaching consequences and not just for her.

Young Rose is the beautiful and privileged daughter of the local doctor. Always kept close by her mother,

Rose seems to have the spoiled and perfect life other girls can only dream about. But all is not well in paradise and by the time the truth is discovered it will be too late for this young woman.

Observing it all is Aggie. Woman of ill repute, fortune teller and spiritualist it is Aggie who sees and knows it all. Unable to interfere she is able to share her knowledge and pearls of wisdom with the reader and in the process comfort the dead.

“There is a time in everyone’s life when you leave behind who you were born to be and become what life makes of you, or you of it.”

This is a beautiful and fascinating book. It captures the claustrophobic atmosphere of a small town in Ireland in the 1930’s with an accuracy that is almost painful. In this town, where it is impossible to be invisible, where opinions are formed to remain in place indefinitely and where the moral high-ground is held by those who least deserve to reside there, it wouldn’t take a lot to disturb the apparent peace and quiet.

What really impressed me is how the author managed to keep the upcoming drama below the surface for so long. While the reader is well aware that disaster is only around the corner – or a few turned pages away – the tone of the story is smooth and almost distant. Nothing is spelled out in detail. The reader has to read between the lines and draw the conclusions that aren’t spelled out. While there is a constant under current of pending doom, the story is told in whispers; the same sort of whispers that would give voice to gossip in a town like this. As a result, the story is told through the words that aren’t on the pages just as much as the words that are actually there. And some of those words are gorgeous:

“Sarah loved opening the shop, loved the way the light lit the silence first thing in the morning.”

Maybe there was a bit too much foreshadowing at the end of the chapters as in, for example “maybe she should’ve listened more carefully”. I understand that this would have been done to up the tension but I don’t think the book needed it. The tone of the story, and all the things that weren’t said or explained made it perfectly clear that we were heading for some sort of climax; the extra hints weren’t necessary in my opinion.

The characters in this book are fascinating, especially since you hear the story from several different perspectives. At first glance it would appear that their problems are very much a product of the time they’re living in, but if you think again not a whole lot has changed. Women who have lost a much wanted baby are still expected to “snap out of it”. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are still viewed with suspicion and mistrusted. Unplanned pregnancies are still a thing to be frowned upon. This is a thought provoking story about women; their strengths and weaknesses in the face of everything life and the people around them may throw at them.

According to the publisher’s information this story is based on real events in 1930s Ireland. I thought about researching what those real events might have been but decided that there really was no need. As much as this story is set in the past and as much as we may read this book and be horrified by the events described, it has to be said that not so much has changed since then. This is still a country where thousands of women feel the need to flee to England every year, where abortion remains illegal under all circumstances and many would refuse a woman that right even if would mean putting her life at risk. Eighty years later so little has changed that this story is far more contemporary than it should be. And that alone makes this a book well worth reading.