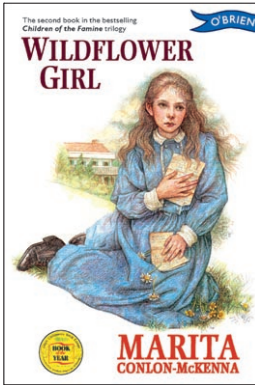


WILDFLOWER GIRL



by Marita Conlon-McKenna, illustrated by Donald Teskey

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Throughout the nineteenth century, Irish people had been leaving their homes in search of work and a better standard of living in England, Australia and America. But in the 1850s, Irish families left in their thousands, fleeing the wretched conditions of post-famine Ireland. Most of these made their way across the Atlantic in over-crowded vessels which came to be known as the 'coffin-ships' because of the numbers who died on them. With Eily engaged to be married and Michael in relatively secure employment, Peggy O'Driscoll, now thirteen, seized the opportunity to leave Castletaggart. Arriving in Boston after a harrowing journey, Peggy finds work as a domestic servant. Homesick and lonely, over-worked and poorly paid, life is still difficult, but as she settles in and makes friends her natural optimism re-asserts itself; Peggy is, after all, 'a born survivor'.

LANGUAGE – ENGLISH

◆ Vocabulary extension: Nonchalant, ruefully, fractious, permeated, dissent, listless, drabness.
◆ Colourful phrases: E.g., 'other fish to fry' (p.131), 'life in the old dog yet' (p.69), 'butter wouldn't melt in her mouth' (p.105), 'you could dance a donkey on it' (p.88).

◆ Discussion: The landlady in the Queenstown lodging-house was 'surly' and only reluctantly agreed to provide porridge in the morning 'for a small extra contribution' (p.43). The house was filthy and the over-cooked food of poor quality, yet she gave the Molloys good advice for which they were later grateful. Discuss the feelings of this landlady. Was she sad? Envious?

◆ Discussion: On Grosse Isle, in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, is a monument to those who, like the Molloys, were too ill to be allowed ashore (p.69) and who later died. The inscription reads: *In this secluded spot lie the remains of 5,294 persons who, flying from pestilence and famine in Ireland in the year 1847, found in America but a grave.* Discuss how the conditions on board the *Fortunata* contributed to the number of dead. Consider the treatment received on first landing: Did the emigrants benefit from proper facilities?

◆ Discussion: Peggy often read the biblical story of Noah and the Ark during her forty-day journey to America. Read the story in Genesis and say why she might have enjoyed it.

◆ Discussion: Peggy is known for her fondness for wildflowers (see *Under the Hawthorn Tree*, pp.24, 137) and we see her gathering flowers just before she leaves Ireland (pp.34–35) and again on a free day in Boston (p.122). What might be the significance of these colourful flowers for Peggy?

◆ Discussion: On the eve of her departure, Nano gave Lena's Bible to Peggy. Peggy 'realised that it was more than just a Bible ... It was her history – the keeping of a tradition' (p.33). How significant was this gift and what might it have meant to Peggy in future years? What might be an appropriate gift to an emigrating family in 2010?

◆ Creative: 'She looked around at the six eager faces, all wondering what lay ahead of them' (p.80). We are told something of Sarah's life in Boston, write the stories of the other

four girls. Follow them from Mrs Halligan's lodging-house and describe their first year.

◆ Creative: Mona Cavendish complained that Peggy was 'another greenhorn to train' (p.82). Imagine Mona is writing to a friend and describe her reactions on meeting Peggy or tell the story of the first maid and give her reasons for leaving.

SESE – HISTORY

◆ Local studies: Schools. Peggy was fortunate in that she had received some schooling and could help Kitty to learn to read (p.112–113). Mrs Madden commented that few in service could read or write (p.146). Contrast the education Peggy received with the education system then available to the poor in America. How did this compare with the education received by Roxanne and her peers (p.114)?

◆ Feasts and festivals in the past: Thanksgiving is usually celebrated on a Thursday in November, traditionally guests wear simple, plain clothes in honour of their pilgrim ancestors. For Peggy, the holiday was a chance to sample 'strange tastes and new things' and it was 'the finest meal she had eaten since leaving Castletaggart' (p.172). Compare Peggy's feelings of being 'at home' with those of the first celebrants of Thanksgiving.

◆ Life, society, work and culture in the past: Life in the nineteenth century. While the tenant-landlord relationship continued in Ireland as before, with many still working, like Michael, for the landed gentry, the Irish in America found opportunities to improve their situation. The men found work as labourers on the building sites and railways (pp.84–85) and the women were usually employed either as domestic servants or in clothing factories (pp.132–133). Those who found work saved their money and sent some of it home to Ireland (p.171) and this money was often used to send other family members to America. Find out about famous American men and women with 'roots' in Ireland and record their achievements. Visit the Ulster-American Folk Park near Omagh (Tel: 048 82256330), and experience life of that time in the New World.

SESE – GEOGRAPHY

◆ Human environments: People in other lands. While more than one million people died as a direct result of the famine, according to census

figures another million emigrated. Examine the contribution made by the Irish in their adopted homeland and explore the interdependence of people in America and Ireland in the twentieth century.

◆ Natural environments: Weather, climate and atmosphere. Peggy and her fellow-passengers suffered dreadfully during stormy conditions at sea. Read the description of the storm (pp.56–58) and study the Beaufort Scale – what wind-force might have been reached during this storm?

SPHE

◆ Myself: Taking care of my body. Examine the conditions of those in steerage on the *Fortunata* who had no washing facilities (p.66) and were deprived of adequate food and water, but they prevented the worst excesses of cabin-fever by sharing their resources. The doctors and nurses of the Boston Port Authority refused permission to land to those who were suffering from contagious illnesses (pp.67–69). Peggy also took care of Kitty when she developed a chest infection (p.142), bringing her hot flannels and plenty of fluids.

◆ Myself: Growing and changing. Peggy was the youngest of the three children, needing the privacy her 'special place' afforded her (pp.11, 12) and Eily in particular felt a maternal responsibility for her, but Peggy insisted on increasing personal independence as she grew older. Read the exchange on p.10 and discuss the reactions of the two girls. How did Peggy establish her right to independence and why did Eily agree to let her go?

◆ Myself: At first, Peggy regretted her decision to travel to America but knew that her choices had been limited (p.24), but her decision to leave Mona Cavendish was impulsive (p.90). Was it a wise decision? Consider her feelings immediately afterwards, when she 'longed for someone to come and mind' her (p.93).

◆ Myself and others: Examine Peggy's friendship with Sarah from their initial meeting (p.52) and the measures she took to protect that relationship even when she had moved (pp.131–133). Though she recognised that her friend Kitty was essentially 'weak and afraid' (p.137), she continued to support her through her illness. She also realised that in Mrs Madden 'she would always have another friend' (p.147).