



Frank Sinatra called her “one stupid broad.” The Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor didn’t care.

**BOOKS**

# Ireland’s Fire

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## REMEMBERINGS by Sinéad O'Connor

In 2010, during the sex-abuse scandals that led to the first retirement of a Pope since 1415, Anderson Cooper solicited opinions from one Sinéad Marie Bernadette O'Connor on CNN. It was all so dignified, so official. "Do you think this Pope should resign?" asked Cooper, earnestly, as if he were querying someone from the masthead of *Commonweal*. This talking head's indignation had become pretty mainstream. For anyone who doesn't recall October 3, 1992—Zoomers, check out YouTube and see O'Connor rip up a Pope pic while singing Bob Marley's "War" on *Saturday Night Live*—it was cancel culture, old-school. Her stunt is still too scandalous for rebroadcasting on NBC or even VH1's *Behind the Music*. In case anyone was wondering, Frank Sinatra called her "one stupid broad."

O'Connor ripped up more than a picture, of course, and I will never forget witnessing it in real time, a few seconds that have been scrutinized like the Zapruder film. I was 19 and convinced that Sinéad O'Connor was, on every level, the real thing. I loved the brutal honesty in every note—lines like “It’s been years since you held the baby while I wrecked the bedroom,” the devastation of “The Last Day of Our Acquaintance,” breakup anthem supreme for pissed-off goddesses everywhere. Like many humans who think and feel, I was completely destroyed every time I heard her No. 1 hit cover of Prince’s “Nothing Compares 2 U,” which I still can’t listen to without all of the hairs on my body standing up—the purpose of great art, *n’est-ce pas?*



An abusive childhood and many years of therapy later, O'Connor has left the source of her troubles behind. "Best day of my life was the day I first left Ireland," she writes, "and any other day I left Ireland was next best."

That night on *S.N.L.*, O'Connor was promoting an album called *Am I Not Your Girl?*—an ad-lib from her stunning cover of Loretta Lynn's "Success"—and the question would be answered by the time the credits rolled, when she was too radioactive to hug. It would be a rough road before the Irish singer made it to Anderson Cooper, and there would be even more rough road still: suicidal ideation, mental-hospital stays,

ordained priesthood, attempts to enroll in college, and, most recently, a conversion to Islam. She did not get into this to make friends.

## On Bob Dylan and James Joyce

People who sell millions of records aren't usually talking about being down to their last eight grand, as O'Connor, now 54, does near the end of *Rememberings*, but usual is not her brand, and one hopes that this book will do something about it, maybe even pay her tuition to study theology. Everything about it is crazy, yet also utterly compelling, persuasive, even beautiful, sprung from a mind like no one else's.

On discovering Bob Dylan as a little girl: "He's as beautiful as if God blew a breath from Lebanon and it became a man." On discovering Yeats in high school: "I love Yeats's poems, they're like music but they open up a different sky, the one that's inside me." James Joyce would be proud of

this from our Irish rose: “Best day of my life was the day I first left Ireland and any other day I left Ireland was next best.”



O'Connor worked as a waitress in Dublin before releasing her first album, *The Lion and the Cobra*, at just 20 years old.

In the most publicized episode in the book, which gets its own chapter, Prince wanted to meet this fiery siren who had that big hit with his song.

He summoned her to his lair, called her “Shine-aid,” and reprimanded her for cursing. She retorted by cursing some more, and when she thought they were playing, she got hurt pretty badly, and the evening devolved from there. (It’s not a fair pillow fight when Prince’s is filled with rocks.) She still sings his song, and she says it’s hers now.

For someone famous for blasphemy, O’Connor is deeply, sincerely, idiosyncratically devout. She’s a seeker to the end, and furious about fakery. She’d tear up that picture again and consider it a sacred act. This is someone who, at 23, called her most well-loved album *I Do Not Want What I Haven’t Got*. That seems like the opposite of crazy, a maturity most people never reach.



O'Connor, Daniel Day-Lewis, and Whoopi Goldberg at the 1991 Governors Ball. The singer achieved worldwide success the year before with a new arrangement of Prince's "Nothing Compares 2 U."

Early on, our beloved martyr realizes, "In real life you aren't allowed to say you're angry but in music you can say anything." It turns out that she thought real life and music were the same thing. You would think she learned her lesson, but, bless her, she never did. God, she tells us, "is an incredible songwriter."

304 pages, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$28  
*Rememberings* will be available at your local independent bookstore, on [Bookshop](#), and on [Amazon](#) beginning June 1.

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