



Someone: A Novel

By Alice McDermott

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A fully realized portrait of one woman's life in all its complexity, by the National Book Award–winning author

An ordinary life?its sharp pains and unexpected joys, its bursts of clarity and moments of confusion?lived by an ordinary woman: this is the subject of *Someone*, Alice McDermott's extraordinary return, seven years after the publication of *After This*. Scattered recollections?of childhood, adolescence, motherhood, old age?come together in this transformative narrative, stitched into a vibrant whole by McDermott's deft, lyrical voice.

Our first glimpse of Marie is as a child: a girl in glasses waiting on a Brooklyn stoop for her beloved father to come home from work. A seemingly innocuous encounter with a young woman named Pegeen sets the bittersweet tone of this remarkable novel. Pegeen describes herself as an "amadan," a fool; indeed, soon after her chat with Marie, Pegeen tumbles down her own basement stairs. The magic of McDermott's novel lies in how it reveals us all as fools for this or that, in one way or another.

Marie's first heartbreak and her eventual marriage; her brother's brief stint as a Catholic priest, subsequent loss of faith, and eventual breakdown; the Second World War; her parents' deaths; the births and lives of Marie's children; the changing world of her Irish-American enclave in Brooklyn?McDermott sketches all of it with sympathy and insight. This is a novel that speaks of life as it is daily lived; a crowning achievement by one of the finest American writers at work today.

A Publishers Weekly Best Fiction Book of the Year

A *Kirkus Reviews* Best Fiction Book of 2013

A *New York Times* Notable Book of 2013

A *Washington Post* Notable Fiction Book of 2013

An NPR Best Book of 2013



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Someone: A Novel By Alice McDermott Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #369592 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Published on: 2013-09-10
- Released on: 2013-09-10
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.45" h x .95" w x 5.70" l, .63 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 240 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In this deceptively simple tour de force, McDermott (Charming Billy, winner of the National Book Award) lays bare the keenly observed life of Marie Commeford, an ordinary woman whose compromised eyesight makes her both figuratively and literally unable to see the world for what it is. When we meet her on the steps of her Brooklyn townhouse, she's a bespectacled seven-year-old waiting for her father; McDermott then leaps ahead, when Marie, pregnant with her first child, recalls collapsing at a deli counter and the narrative plunges us into a world where death is literally just around the corner, upending the safety and comfort of her neighborhood; In a few months' time, I would be at death's door, last rites and all, she relates. We follow Marie through the milestones of her life, shadowed by her elder brother, Gabe, who mysteriously leaves the priesthood for which everyone thought he was destined. The story of Marie's life unfolds in a nonlinear fashion: McDermott describes the loss of Marie's father, her first experience with intimacy, her first job (in a funeral parlor of all places), her marriage, the birth of a child. We come to feel for this unremarkable woman, whose vulnerability makes her all the more winning—and makes her worthy of our attention. And that's why McDermott, a three-time Pulitzer nominee, is such an exceptional writer: in her hands, an uncomplicated life becomes singularly fascinating, revealing the heart of a woman whose defeats make us ache and whose triumphs we cheer. Marie's vision (and ours) eventually clears, and she comes to understand that what she so often failed to see lay right in front of her eyes. Agent: Sarah Burnes, Gernert Company. (Sept.)

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review "Who is going to love me?" Marie asks her older brother, Gabe, after her heart is broken. "Someone," he replies. How humble this pronoun is, and what a provocative title it makes. Readers who love refined, unhurried, emotionally fluent fiction will rejoice at National Book Award–winner McDermott's return. McDermott (After This, 2006) is a master of hidden intensities, intricate textures, spiked dialogue, and sparkling wit. We first meet Marie at age seven, when she's sitting on the stoop in her tight-knit, Irish-Catholic Brooklyn neighborhood, waiting for her father to come home from work. Down the street, boys play stickball, consulting with dapper Billy, their blind umpire, an injured WWI vet. Tragedies and scandals surge through the enclave, providing rough initiations into sex and death. Gabe becomes a priest. Marie works at a funeral home as a "consoling angel," acquiring cryptic clues to the mysteries of life via teatime gossip sessions with the director's wise mother and a circle of wryly knowing nuns. Eventually Marie finds joy as a wife and mother, while Gabe struggles with his faith and sexuality. A marvel of subtle modulations, McDermott's keenly observed, fluently humane, quietly entralling novel of conformity and selfhood, of "lace-curtain pretensions" as shield and camouflage, celebrates family, community, and "the grace of a shared past." HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: A new McDermott novel is big news, and *Someone* will be heralded nationally with an author tour and enhanced cross-country publicity in all media. --Donna Seaman

Review

"[McDermott's] sentences know themselves so beautifully: what each has to deliver and how best to do it, within a modicum of space, with minimal fuss . . . She understands that nothing is unalloyed, not kindness or cruelty, not gladness or despair. Here, in the most deceptively ordinary language, she evokes both the world of light and that of darkness . . . [*Someone*] has something of the quality of a slide show . . . Each slide, each scene, from the ostensibly inconsequential to the clearly momentous, is illuminated with equal care. The effect on the reader is of sitting alongside the narrator, sharing the task of sifting the salvaged fragments of her life, watching her puzzle over, rearrange and reconsider them--and at last, but without any particular

urgency or certitude, tilting herself in the direction of finally discerning their significance. This is a quiet business, but it's the sense-making we all engage in, the narrative work that allows us to construct a coherent framework for our everyday existence. It's also a serious business, the essential work of an examined life . . . McDermott's excellence is on ample display here." ?Leah Hager Cohen, *The New York Times Book Review*

"One of the great strengths of [*Someone*] lies in this sense of tenderness and intimacy, of empathy for the human condition . . . The narrative unfolds slowly, through small moments of beauty and vividness . . . The moments are small, but packed with complexity and emotion . . . There are many reasons to write a novel. One--maybe the best--is to bear compassionate witness to what it is to be alive, in this place, this time. This kind of novel is necessary to us. We need to know about other lives: This kind of knowledge expands our understanding, it enlarges our souls. There are differences between us, but there are things we share. Fear and vulnerability, joy and passion, the capacity for love and pain and grief: Those are common to us all. Those are the things that great novelists explore. And it's this exploration, made with tenderness, wisdom and caritas, that's at the heart of Alice McDermott's masterpiece." ?Roxana Robinson, *The Washington Post*

"Just as McDermott manages to write lyrically in plain language, she is able to find the drama in uninflected experience. This is the grand accomplishment of *Someone*, a deceptively simple book that is, in fact, extraordinarily artful, a novel that traces the arc of an unexceptional, almost anonymous life and, seemingly by accident though of course on purpose, turns a run-of-the-mill story into a poem." ?Charles McNulty, *The Los Angeles Times*

"McDermott's seventh novel is a remarkable portrait of an unremarkable life . . . The novel unfolds in a series of elliptical, out-of-order memories as Marie, an obsessive observer of people, looks back over her life and tries to decipher the motivations, desires, and private feelings of those she has encountered. With virtuosic concision, McDermott assembles this swirl of seemingly mundane anecdotes into a powerful examination of love, mortality, and 'the way of all flesh.'" ?*The New Yorker*

"Few contemporary writers can bring a time and place to life as well as Alice McDermott . . . Beginning in post-World War I Brooklyn, N.Y., and ending up in the split-level suburbs, [*Someone*] works the subtle magic of all good art--its particulars yield a universal world . . . Exquisitely observed, the story takes liberties with time, juxtaposing Marie's past, present and future. The characters of her childhood continue to turn up, literally or in memory. Their secrets, their scandals and tragedies, color her adulthood . . . McDermott treats every character with unsentimental fondness. She never sets herself up to forgive or excuse; instead, she embraces each person with a kind of wonder and acceptance that becomes its own form of morality. A rare and lovely writer, she's given us another book brimming with earthly grace." ?Tricia Springstubb, *The Plain Dealer (Cleveland)*

"Novelist Alice McDermott, winner of the National Book Award and three-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize . . . does scene. And she's at her most brilliant doing it in *Someone* . . . *Someone* is ordinary Marie's scattered retellings of her ordinary life. In interviews, McDermott has discussed retelling--how it is not the same as what happened. Events take place, and then they are over. What we have to say about them afterward is colored or shaded. Memory transforms. As Marie is retelling, she jumps forward and back in time. Her nonlinear presentation, combined with her strangely faulty eyesight, keeps us fascinated." ?Isabel Nathaniel, *Dallas Morning News*

"[*Someone* is] filled with subtle insights and abundant empathy and grace." ?*USA Today*

"'Ordinary' is a word that's used a lot to describe McDermott's characters, mostly Irish and working class, mostly un-heroic in any splashy way. McDermott's heroine is named Marie and in *Someone*, we readers hear, in a fragmented way, about the marathon span of her life . . . yet in McDermott's unsentimental rendering,

Marie's ordinary life becomes one for the record books. That's the spectacular power of McDermott's writing: Without ever putting on literary airs, she reveals to us what's distinct about characters who don't have the ego or eloquence to make a case for themselves as being anything special . . . [McDermott is] a master of silence and gesture." ?*Maureen Corrigan, NPR*

"Within the first few sentences of *Someone* the gentle but powerful descriptive force of Alice McDermott's writing convinces the reader that this is an important story . . . With short, deft strokes McDermott immediately transports you back to 1940s Brooklyn . . . In just 230 pages McDermott manages to capture a lifetime--60 years--of love, heartbreak, joy sorrow . . . The lyricism of her prose is deceptively simple. It propels you from a safe, daytime moment into a life of fear and drudgery in a mere turn of phrase . . . There is nothing jarring in *Someone*; nothing intense or loud -- its beauty is that it explores the soul through the living of ordinary lives." ?*Deborah Dundas, The Toronto Star*

"A quiet tour de force of a story. McDermott writes in lyrical yet methodical prose about an ordinary woman living an ordinary life, a seemingly nonstory with heartache, joy, suffering and beauty all simmering beneath the scattered recollections that make up the novel . . . Marie narrates the novel in a voice that is both subdued and compelling. Her life is punctuated by astute observations of the people around her as she grows from child to adolescent to adult . . . So skillful, so controlled . . . Ordinary life is made extraordinary by McDermott's tender characterization of women, of husbands, of sons, of parents--a life that includes both the dark and the light within the simply ordinary." ?*Eliana Smith, The Kansas City Star*

"A gentle novel that follows the life of Irish-American Marie as a six-year-old on the stoop of her home in Brooklyn in 1920s all the way to her twilight years in a care home. The narration is episodic and unchronological. Although it centres on the quotidian realities of an unremarkable woman, its themes are universal . . . There is beauty and grace in the pages." ?*Thuy On, The Sydney Morning Herald*

"*Someone* [is] a quiet tour de force of a story. McDermott writes in lyrical yet methodical prose about an ordinary woman living an ordinary life, a seemingly nonstory with heartache, joy, suffering and beauty all simmering beneath the scattered recollections that make up the novel . . . The unknown is to be feared but not avoided. Ordinary life is made extraordinary by McDermott's tender characterization of women, of husbands, of sons, of parents--a life that includes both the dark and the light within the simply ordinary." ?*Elaina Smith, The Morning Sentinel*

"In this deceptively simple tour de force, McDermott . . . lays bare the keenly observed life of Marie Commeford, an ordinary woman whose compromised eyesight makes her both figuratively and literally unable to see the world for what it is . . . We come to feel for this unremarkable woman, whose vulnerability makes her all the more winning--and makes her worthy of our attention. And that's why McDermott, a three-time Pulitzer nominee, is such an exceptional writer: in her hands, an uncomplicated life becomes singularly fascinating, revealing the heart of a woman whose defeats make us ache and whose triumphs we cheer. Marie's vision (and ours) eventually clears, and she comes to understand that what she so often failed to see lay right in front of her eyes." ?*Publishers Weekly (starred)*

"One of the author's most trenchant explorations into the heart and soul of the 20th-century Irish-American family . . . Marie's straightforward narration is interrupted with occasional jumps back and forward in time that create both a sense of foreboding and continuity as well as a mediation on the nature of sorrow . . . Marie and Gabe are compelling in their basic goodness, as is McDermott's elegy to a vanished world." ?*Kirkus*

"Readers who love refined, unhurried, emotionally fluent fiction will rejoice at National Book Award–winner McDermott's return. McDermott . . . is a master of hidden intensities, intricate textures, spiked dialogue, and sparkling wit. We first meet Marie at age seven, when she's sitting on the stoop in her

tight-knit, Irish-Catholic Brooklyn neighborhood, waiting for her father to come home from work. Down the street, boys play stickball, consulting with dapper Billy, their blind umpire, an injured WWI vet. Tragedies and scandals surge through the enclave, providing rough initiations into sex and death . . . A marvel of subtle modulations, McDermott's keenly observed, fluently humane, quietly entralling novel of conformity and selfhood, of 'lace-curtain pretensions' as shield and camouflage, celebrates family, community, and 'the grace of a shared past.'" ?*Donna Seaman, Booklist (starred)*

"[An] incantatory new novel, in which the landscape of memory is a chiaroscuro in motion and the sightlines are seldom entirely unobstructed . . . The maudlin and the twee that have tripped up so many others' attempts at Irish-American portraiture are no temptation for McDermott. She does not genuflect, nor does she cling to grievance. She looks with a sharp gaze and a generous spirit, finds multitudes even in a clan's closed air, and tells a clear-eyed, kinder tale." ?*Laura Collins-Hughes, The Boston Globe*

"Stories of the ordinary become extraordinary . . . It's easy to understand why McDermott has been a National Book Award winner and Pulitzer finalist for several of her books. Her subtle push to the reader to rely on other senses is brilliant, as her protagonist must do the same. McDermott has a way of transporting a reader not only to see the sights of the city, but also to absorb its heat, smell its food and feel its loss." ?*Beth Golay, KMUW Wichita Public Radio*

"Alice McDermott is such a pleasure to read. Her new novel, her seventh, extends her outstanding body of work and further cements her stature as one of our finer writers." ?*Gordon Houser, The Wichita Eagle*

"Alice McDermott performs a minor miracle with her new novel, *Someone: A Novel*, crafting a captivating story in which nothing much happens . . . In fewer than 250 pages, *Someone*, which appeared on the long list for the 2013 National Book Award for Fiction, charts Marie's life, presenting her observations about her immediate world in a plain-spoken voice that evokes the past but feels immediate and familiar . . . you get the impression that Marie, the daughter of hardscrabble Irish Catholics, would speak and think in the dry-witted, captivatingly matter-of-factness of McDermott's prose, through which the novel accrues a lingering emotive power." ?*Bret McCabe, The Johns Hopkins Gazette*

"By presenting Marie's life in gorgeously realized anecdotes, [*Someone*] makes you understand that you, too, are constantly writing your own life, just as Marie has written hers, and that you might be more ordinary than you usually like to think yourself . . . [It will] astonish you with its image of the infinite anxiety of the human condition, the precariousness of existence, the difficulty and necessity of loving, the epics and comedies and tragedies and elegies embedded in every mundane, pedestrian life." ?*Stephanie Bernhard, Full Stop*

"*Someone*, by Alice McDermott, is a book you will be lost in while the leaves float and swirl about . . . McDermott is the National Book Award winning author of *Charming Billy*. This is her first book in seven years and absolutely worth the wait." ?*Cathy Daniels, The Lansing State Journal*

"Prize-winning author Alice McDermott has two hallmarks as a novelist: First, she writes intimately and well about the Irish Catholic world in which she grew up. Secondly, she uses ordinary people and events to uncover the extraordinary nature of daily existence . . . In her latest novel, *Someone*, she flips the tables with an unlikely heroine who finds love despite herself . . . *Someone: It's not just a title, but also a central theme of a novel that looks at the wonders of love and marriage with a discerning eye . . . The most salient quality of the book, and McDermott's work in general, is her ability to capture the spoken and unspoken richness of our most important relationships.*" ?*Ellen Emry Heltzel, The Seattle Times*

"The effect of the episodic narrative by the novel's conclusion is what the Cubists tried to give us: the full picture, piece by piece. McDermott is a National Book Award winner, and this slender novel calls on all her gifts: spot-on description, dialogue that conveys the quotidian while simultaneously hinting at deeper

meanings, and a true sense of place and time, whether it's Brooklyn of the 1920s as at the start of the novel, or the nursing home where Marie eventually ends up. Each 'scene' of the story is set up with the care and precision of a visual artist . . . *Someone* delivers the thrill of discovering in the ordinary something that is at once universal yet somehow special and meaningful. Throughout, McDermott's prose keeps us in thrall as we await the coming together of the complete story--or as complete as it will get. It's a remarkable accomplishment and a scintillating portrait of an average life--not too different from the one each of us is leading at this very moment." ?John Winters, *Enterprise News*

"There is the temptation, after reading Alice McDermott, to read nothing else for the longest time--to hold every exquisite word of her most exquisite novels in your head . . . That she exercises patience, compassion and wisdom where others emphasize strut, that she trusts herself with the power of scenes over the inflated intricacies of complicated plot. There is the temptation to use the word 'genius' in association with McDermott's name." ?Beth Kephart, *The Baltimore Sun* on *Child of My Heart*

"[A] wondrous new novel . . . *Child of My Heart* extends [McDermott's] artistic triumphs, and we should rejoice." ?*Los Angeles Times Book Review* on *Child of My Heart*

"A master . . . As good as any literary novelist writing today, and when I say that I include the big guns: Russell Banks, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison . . . All [McDermott's] books mirror the essential truths of existence so sure-handedly that they are neither comedies nor tragedies, but merely true." ?Anna Quindlen on *Child of My Heart*

"Has something classic about it . . . [Its] craftsmanship and its moral intelligence are as one . . . Immaculate." ?*The New York Times Book Review* on *Child of My Heart*

"Richly textured, intricately woven . . . A work not only of, but about, the imagination." ?Margaret Atwood, *The New York Review of Books* on *Child of My Heart*

"In a league of her own." ?*People* on *Child of My Heart*

"We have echoes and stirrings of Hardy, Shakespeare, Dickens, James, Beatrix Potter, Christina Rosetti . . . [Theresa] is a vessel containing a multitude of heroines, a transcendence of ethereal beauties who loved and live in the minds of their readers and inventors." ?*Chicago Tribune* on *Child of My Heart*

"[A] quietly enchanting novel, graced by McDermott's well-calibrated writing and observant eye . . . Filled with subtle truths and hard-won wisdom." ?*The Charlotte Observer* on *Child of My Heart*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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