

Molly Keane's **Private Diary** *Novelist, playwright and the author of GOOD BEHAVIOUR writes about the month in which she was short-listed for the Booker Prize.*

October 1st

Things happen to me in October - 10 years ago, I was married in October - in another October a successful play opened in London - In a black October, my husband died.

In October 1981, at seven o'clock in the evening, I'm sitting at home in Ardmore, drink in hand. The sea-light fills the windows, the fire burns, dinner simmers - Friend and Publisher, Diana Athik, partner of Andre Deutsch, sits opposite with her tapestry work, and a drink, naturally - the telephone rings - a call from London - It is Andre Deutsch.

"Oh, Andre - you want to speak to 'na?"

"No. I want to speak with you. First, sit down." I obey, ready for disaster...

"You've been short-listed for the Booker Prize."

October 5th

I'm in Dublin - I seldom come

to Dublin now. I'm nervous, nervous as a kitten because Andre and Diana are giving a great launching party for my book, "Good Behaviour" and for Michael Curtin's "The Replay".

I stay with **George & Michelina Stacpoole**. Their house is full of lovely things and their calm and comfort shepherd me through the long day before the party. I wear one of Michelina's famous knits - those never failing clothes which adapt to every occasion - a country day, a town day, even dinner, with decorations and a discreet unbuttoning.

Five-thirty - the awful hour! Michelina does my hair and my face. George brings me a whisky. We arrive at the great Gallery, met at its entrance by a statue George has found and sold to the Curator. Pictures on the walls are as remote and unreal as my own voice sounds to me. More whisky. Better. More

and more people - all so young - beautiful young clever journalists and critics and they all love my book - Can it be true? - or is it true? - Who else is here? **Denis Johnston**, looking like four handsome apostles, and **Betty**, always a doll. How many years ago she almost stole my play, "Spring Meeting" from Margaret Rutherford? **Brian and Ulli de Breffny** - those two beauties and dear friends; **Thomas McCarthy**, my poet friend from Cappoquin, alas, he is not among those present. But the Knight of Glin came, swift as an arrow (not by any means poisoned) with his running commentary on life and people and books - **Sybil Connolly**, oblivious of the lovely clothes she wears - on memories of **Adele Astaire** - Cavendish - Douglass, our binding links.

The Gallery is crowded with friends, old and loyal, newly-made and thrilling, such as **Nuala O'Farrell**, literary critic on the Tribune - what a clever girl and she liked my book! - How I regret the absence of **Elgy Gillespie**, another brilliant young journalist, but she is on a Paris assignment. Drink (the hard stuff) flows + talk flows. Is this the happiest party given in the world tonight - why did I ever feel shy?

October 5th

I'm in London, staying with my younger daughter, **Virginia** and my son-in-law, **Kevin Brownlow**. Three things bring me here: another lavish party Andre is giving for the book, at the famous Garrick Club; then, the fateful Booker-McConnell Dinner - then, a very black reason - Virginia is to have a major operation later in the month. Well - on with the dance.

It's autumn on Haverstock Hill. Fallen leaves from cherry trees and plastic offal rustle and scrape together on the pavements - a frail old gentleman passes by, leading a stout long-haired dachshund - the old gentleman's blue winter overcoat leaves a faint trail of camphor on the air, more positive than himself. Winter is heaven.

"And, what are you going to wear for the parties?" My

children say to me in a doubtful suggestive way. "I shall buy some gold shoes," I answer evasively - I'm not going to be bullied into spending £100. I trudge round the shoe shop - averting my eyes from the £40 models. The second exhausting day yields up the perfect things - gold with a little dark check to soften the golden blow, and not 6" heels. And not £40. I bring my superb black velvet trousers to be cleaned and pressed. Two years ago, they came to me from Washington - a mercy-parcel from my beloved friend, **Go Merrill**. My black chiffon shirt is as clean as a whistle - no need to spend money on that.

We shall have a small supper party after the Garrick. Can I face the cooking? Dear and talented Ian Sellars - in intervals from his film making, will do it. I shall make the chicken's liver pâtés (from Myrtle Allen's classic cook-book) Ian will construct an enormous beef stew and not out of stewing beef either!

Flowers? God, the price! I buy a sheaf of daisies as large as a corn stack for £3. I needn't have worried. Friends send bouquets, lovely bunches, crisp and enticing as Christmas dolls boxed within their stretched plastic veils.

October 9th

The Garrick party - strangely, less alarmed than in Dublin and wearing all the gold I own around my neck and arms. I am driven in Andre's glorious car to the glorious Garrick. The entrance hall with its two porters' lodges is so Proustian. I expect tiger-like footmen in white gloves to receive me. Up a wide flight of steps to another great room full of pictures - portraits of actors from Daria Garrick to Gladys Cooper. Her beautiful youth is frozen forever in an enormous Sargent-like oil painting, so far distant from the true and hardworking Gladys I knew.

The room (as is usual at parties) fills with people - Andre and Diana introduce me to literary lions and lionesses. Their superbly expressed comments on



Michael Caine, Chairman of Booker McConnell presenting Molly Keane with a leather bound edition of her book *GOOD BEHAVIOUR*.



Frank Delaney with Euan Cameron of the Sunday Tribune at the Booker McConnell Presentation.

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my book turn me giddy with pleasure – or, is it the whisky? Ever-loyal country friends of mine are here too . . . what can **Sibell Rowley** (lately Master of the Ledbury) have in common with **John Gielgud**? Either can talk on any subject, with anyone, but they seem animated and interested for such a brief encounter. The link is “Brideshead Revisited”, the current television series in which John – as always – steals the picture from the Principals. In Evelyn Waugh’s book, the original of Brideshead was Madresfield, Sibell’s family’s house. No wonder their heads are together for so long.

Joyce Carey is looking thirty years younger than her unknown age and dear and brighter than ever. In a former life I see her, wearing a fetching hat (girls wore hats then) and meeting Noël for luncheon in the Ivy. **Alan Webb** is another who breathed life and laughter into a play of mine and John Perry’s – I embrace **Gina** and Murray Pollinger, my literary agents, originators of the book’s sales and success and, I hope, friends for all time . . . I can’t go on being Jennifer’s Diary . . . it is a very wonderful party, and Andre and Diana are the greatest living hosts.

October 12th

A television interview for Thames’ “Afternoon Plus” programme. God help me in this new experience – He does. **Mavis Nicholson**, interviewer and **Leslie Clark**, take me out to a chic luncheon beforehand.

October 14th

A morning flight to Dublin for a Telefis interview with **Anita Leslie** – her newly published autobiography is so vivid and so dryly entertaining. I’m nervous again at the encounter. But she is as human and beautiful and funny as possible.

October 16th

The Booker is very near and so is Virginia’s operation. She puts it all aside in her concern for me and her pleasure in the book’s success. Like all daughters she rather worries over my appearance and sets out to guide and subdue me a little – “Mummie you *must* buy a proper evening dress.”

“No, darling. I’m wearing the blue caftan Dellie gave me in 1976 – it’s Gucci – it’s dateless – and it was Dellie’s.” That settles that but clothes troubles are not finished with yet. **Sheila Murphy** – Publicity Boss in Andre Deutsch, whose job includes being prop, stay and advisor to authors, rings me up to say: “Booker McConnell would like you to bring an Escort”. “An Escort? What do I want with an Escort? At my age? I’m going with Andre and Diana.” “Well, if it’s possible, an Escort,” Sheila says.

She puts me on my mettle. A bit degrading not to have an Escort. But where is he? I think of John Perry, friend of my hunting days and collaborator in my plays. He hates London now and avoids parties. Still, perhaps . . . As any ugly deb I ring Christall 666 – “Darling, I’d love to come. But you know my dinner jacket went when my house burnt down. Yes – alas, it’s burnt up”, he says.

Finally, I telephone my troubles to my friend, **Stephen Vernon** in far away Kinsale. “Of course, I’ll lend him my dinner jacket,” Stephen says at once. “You gave yours to your step-grandson in Australia – don’t you remember?” “But I have three dinner jackets,” Stephen says deprecatingly, “John can have the one with the velvet shawl collar and my watered silk waistcoat.” It’s the tailor of Gloucester come true – and another hurdle over.

October 20th

The night of the Booker dinner party – it’s also the morning of another interview with Thames. Shall I survive both ordeals? Shall I have a stroke? No. I shan’t. I want to see everyone at Thames again. Besides, it means the fee, twice over. And that darling girl in make up will build me a face that ought to last till evening.

At the unnerving hour of 5.30, we set out, in John Perry’s car, for Stationers Hall. John looks ravishing in Stephen’s dinner jacket, lucky they are both so tall. My face has lasted, and I bless Dellie’s memory and Gucci’s uncrushable caftan as we go path-finding through London from Hampstead to Stationers Hall. We get there, too early. Of course, which adds to tension as I wait in the chill wind for heavy doors to open.

When at last they let us in, red carpets and warmth and welcome and drink await us. Presently the stairs are crowded and the rooms are full. The men are all black tie and the women’s skirts sweep to the ground. Deep cleavages sweep pretty low too. It is a great family gathering of the Literati. John and I stand together and look on – the isolation doesn’t last. Andre and Diana take care of that. Soon everyone I had viewed as glamorous and interesting, or both, come to talk with me. They are so emphatic and free with their praise and pleasure in my book, I begin to think it must be fascinating, funny, tragic, penetrating and amusing and tear-compelling – well worth the Booker £10,000. When two or three of the judges and the giant bronzed Penguin add their golden opinions, I nourish a dazzling hope. In that happy hour, I should have known they were only being comforters before the coming disappointment. But I still remember and cherish their words.

Dinner – I’m in a haze – a handsome old man who loves the book, all my books, bless him, sits on my left. Two important young men, with a lot to say to each other, and not much to me, are together on my right. Dinner is wonderful: **Mousse of Avocado and spiced mushrooms** – no, I daren’t! **Gougeons of sole – sauce vert.** Yes. **Breast of Pheasant Souvaroff** – too strung up to taste it – **hazelnut Bombe** – delicious.

During dinner my hopes are riding ridiculously high, riding for the fall that comes with the announcement. But of course the Indian book had to get the prize. Brilliant new conception in novel writing . . . an inspired aspect of the third world . . . how could such a book fail of recognition? I take a great deal of comfort, not only in Andre and Diana’s loving confidence in my work, but in the wonderful and established writers who were down the course that evening . . . and from far away, Elizabeth Bowens great spirit (she too was an ‘also-ran’ in the Booker) whispers a word to me. Elation comes and goes. It was an unforgettable party of endless hospitality and soothing waves of kindness from those great Patrons and friends of writers, Booker

McConnell.

October 22

Virginia goes in to University College Hospital. She packs her own nightdresses. She makes plans for Kevin and me. She is calm, with the tautness of a strung bow. Of course no tears are shed. Better, perhaps, if they were. But, above all things, let’s play down the drama. Next day is her operation. Eight hours of it for her. And for Kevin, eight hours to wait before he hears the results. He flogs away at his book about Napoleon – I shall hear his typewriter if I ever dream about that day – which – God forbid.

It is six o’clock before we know the result . . . operation a fantastic success. We are very happy about her . . . the surgeon’s happiness is nothing to ours. The roof of the very solid building almost lifts under the levitation of our happiness and relief. For me now the Booker is no more than a misty fantasy. No failure counts since Virginia is safe.

Before I return to Ardmore, I go into a huddle with my next novel. I think of Christmas. Always too near and shopping always too late. But this year – with rather more money in my purse than usual – I shall make straight for Elizabeth David – we are all cooks – of different grades and this is the perfect place in which to solve the present-giving problems. From Pimlico Road, it’s a step to Sloane Square and John Sandoe’s book shop in Blacklands Terrace. This is the most searching and caring bookshop in all London. There’s a good read, and a good gossip which John can fill a happy hour – there will be a lot of heavy parcels to carry home. But I’m going to travel in a friend’s car and talk all the way. When, in the early morning, we reach Wexford from the Rosslare boat, we shall stop at White’s Hotel and drink rum and hot milk, a slice of lemon, stuck with one clove, on top – then, on to Kinsale and the gala carol singing in Saint Multose church before, next day, I go home to Ardmore. Ardmore is the place I love most, the place where I know certainly that all my friends in the village and round it will be kind to me – Books and Booker Prize forgotten – however old and silly I may grow.