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Chapters And Verse

Permission To Be Happy

Maeve Binchy, Ireland's best loved living author and one of it's best exports announced her retirement not long ago. At age 60, the author of the blockbuster bestsellers *Circle of Friends*, *The Glass Lake*, *Evening Class* and *Tara Road*, says she has enough money and fame in her life so the just released *Scarlet Feather* will be her last book. I've been lucky enough to have a few conversations with Maeve, a wonderfully compelling person who talks a blue streak in her terrific accent and every word is a gem. I've been thinking a lot about her this summer, about what she told me about herself and about happiness during our last conversation, both on air and off. She was in Canada with her writer husband, Gordon Snell, to promote the publication of *Evening Class*. How do two writers share a life and a profession, I wondered, in their small village of Dorkey, just 10 miles outside Dublin?:

"We both sit at a long table, cats curled up, and work from 7 until half past one or two; then we read to each other what we've done in the morning. If you don't like, we have a rule that you have to be completely honest and truthful. Once, Gordon said to me when I was writing *Glass Lake*: "I think that character is going to make me throw up, she's so goody-two-shoes!" Sometimes I've had to say about one of his verses that I don't think it's funny, which can be very hurtful."

Then Gordon explained that they could carry on this way because "we have this strict rule called Sulking Time. If you get a criticism, then you're allowed to go off and sulk for ten minutes. But then you have to come back and say either "I think you have a point" or "I think your criticism's wrong and it's going to stay as it is", but you're not allowed to go and nurse the grudge."

In many respects the ease with which Maeve now says good-bye to her profession (and the money machine generated by a string of bestsellers) seems to be a by-product of her surprise success.

"My first few attempts at writing were rejected. So I started writing about what I knew about and I write as I spoke, which made me believable. I always set my books in small towns because

its easier. It's a good explanation of why everybody meets everybody....otherwise, how would I organize the characters to meet? I feel comfortable in the 50s and 60s. All my heroines were born when I was born - in 1940 - so I don't have to do a spot of research!"

She's always shied away from politics, in part, she explains, because there was no IRA in the life of her characters so they weren't talking about politics.

She went on to say, that in fact there was great predictability to life when she was young. "We felt safe. There was no divorce in Ireland so you knew your parents were never going to separate. The big worry was emigration so everyone tried not to emigrate and to continue living in their house."

"My main characters are usually women. I don't know what men think about. Not that I'm comparing myself to Jane Austen...but she once said "It's very hard to write what gentleman say when they talk to other gentlemen because we are never in the room with them."

"So, partly it's the familiarity...there are two kinds of popular fiction, escapism and the familiar. I'd be no good at the kind of sex and shopping and spy thriller escapism because I don't know anything about it. I don't write about sex, not because I'm a Holy Joe....the only reason is that I would be very embarrassed writing about sex. If I were writing about someone I know, I would feel disloyal and, if I'm writing fantasy, I could imagine all my friends, and indeed my enemies, saying, "well, would you look at what poor Maeve is fantasizing about!" I'd also be afraid I'd laugh while I was writing it!"

"Mine are not make-over books. The fat don't become thin, the poor don't become rich and the single don't all become married. But what they do all learn is to take charge of their own lives, so, in a sense, I'm quite a bossy person."

She says she loves attention and being the centre of things so she's pleased her retirement from writing is causing such a stir. Her plans are simple – four hour lunches, bridge, surfing the net and reading thrillers instead of her own rough drafts!

Near the end of our hour together (it went so fast!), I mentioned that she often seemed to give her characters PERMISSION to be happy.

"I do because I think a lot of us (and certainly people of my generation) maybe, hopefully, not so many of the next generation, it's like a puritan thing - they're almost ashamed to be happy and this is a TRAGEDY. We're here for such a short time - we've got to make the best of it."

She's right. Happy retirement Maeve.