

## Academy Street

**Author:** Mary Costello

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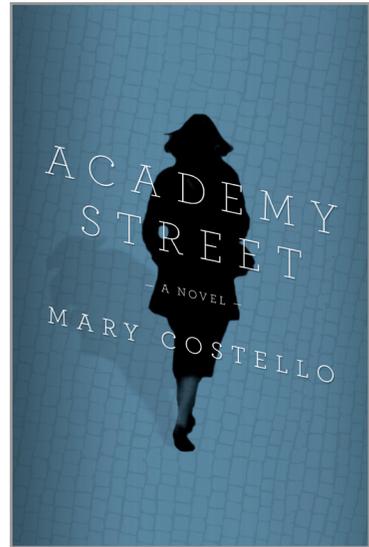
**Publisher:** Farrar, Straus and Giroux (New York). 160 pp.

**Type of work:** Novel

**Time:** Mid-1940s–early 2000s

**Locales:** Ireland; New York City, New York

*The story of a woman who grows up among a large family in rural Ireland but spends most of her life isolated in the most populous city of the United States, Academy Street packs more than fifty years of heartbreak, disappointment, disillusion, and indecision into a small volume.*



(Courtesy of Farrar Straus & Giroux)

### Principal characters:

TERESA “TESS” LOHAN, a woman born to a large family in Ireland who eventually moves to New York City

EVELYN LOHAN, her older sister

CLAIRE LOHAN, her older sister

MAEVE LOHAN, her older sister

DENIS LOHAN, her older brother

OLIVER LOHAN, her younger brother, who grows up wild

MOLLY, her aunt, who lives in the United States and works at Bell Telephone

THEO, her child, born out of wedlock

WILLA, one of her neighbors in New York City

MICHAEL JOSEPH “MIKE” CONNOLLY, a kindly workman on the Lohan farm

ANNE BECKETT, an Irish nurse in New York City

DAVID O’HARA, Anne’s cousin from Dublin, a lawyer

*Academy Street* (2015) begins with a tragedy that forever afterward defines the sense of loss and longing that marks the life of protagonist Teresa “Tess” Lohan. It is the mid-1940s, and the opening scene is a rural farm in the west of Ireland near Galway, where cattle, sheep, pigs, and chickens are raised. In the large, ancient farmhouse called Easterfield, seven-year-old Tess is dressed in her best clothes. The rest of the family—Tess’s four older siblings and one infant brother, plus various aunts, uncles, and local acquaintances—are gathered for a solemn occasion. Tess’s mother, just forty years old, has died of tuberculosis, and her coffin is being hauled downstairs to be placed in a hearse for the trip to the cemetery. Tess, her sister Maeve, and her baby brother Oliver are considered too young to attend the funeral, so they are left behind

in the care of Mike Connolly, the competent longtime farmhand. Her mother's death is just the first in a string of small and large tragedies that deeply affect Tess.

In the absence of the influence of a woman, the formerly carefree, loving environment of the farm drastically changes. Tess's father becomes morose, the children fall silent to avoid incurring his ire, and gloom descends. A portent of what is to come occurs just days after the funeral. A tinker and his family stop by the farmhouse to beg. The tinker's daughter, Tess's age, sticks out her tongue at Tess, which Tess feels is like a curse. At school, other children, who know about her mother's death, torment her with stories of grave robbers. Walking home from school, Tess passes the tinker family camp, and she sticks out her tongue at the tinker's daughter, who mysteriously sickens and dies days later. Stunned by what she thinks she has done, Tess stops talking. Neither doctors nor teachers nor family members can make her utter a word until she is ready to do so on her own.

A few years later, Tess and her sister Maeve board at a convent school. Latin teacher Mr. Clarke, who was born at the Lohan house when it was under different ownership, tells her the history of her home, built in the seventeenth century. During the mid-nineteenth century, Easterfield was a hospital for victims of the Irish potato famine, and hundreds of patients who died of sickness and starvation were buried on the farm. Death was planted long before the Lohans arrived, and death from starvation of the spirit is to be the family's destiny.

The Lohan fortunes indeed change for the worse. Because of financial strain, at age thirteen Tess has to drop out of school to assist her sister Evelyn, now married and the mother of three children. Tess returns home in her late teens to find things greatly changed. Her sister Claire has immigrated to the United States and is working at Bell Telephone alongside their aunt Molly; Mike Connolly has retired; and her younger brother, Oliver, is growing up wild. With nothing left for her at home, Tess applies to become and is accepted as a nursing trainee in Dublin, following her late mother's former profession.

In 1962, Tess, in her early twenties, moves to New York City to be near Claire, now married and the mother of a small child, and lands a job as a nurse at a medical center. Almost immediately, Claire moves with her husband to San Francisco, California, and Tess is on her own again. She befriends Anne Beckett, a fellow nurse also from Ireland who is engaged to be married, and the two women share an apartment for a time. Tess meets Anne's cousin from Ireland, David O'Hara, a tall, blond lawyer, and is drawn to him. After encouragement from Tess, Oliver moves to New York as well, working in construction and occasionally visiting with his sister and Anne on weekends; however, their relationship ultimately faces hardship as well.

Tess and David keep running into one another at various social functions. Just before David leaves to join the Air Force, he seduces Tess, who becomes pregnant around the time of a national tragedy: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Tess attempts to contact David, but receives no reply, so she buys a cheap wedding band to pretend she is married. She informs Claire of her situation. Claire would gladly fly out to help Tess, except she has small children who need her care, and is ill herself.

Eventually, Tess gives birth to a son she names Theo. Though initially she thinks of putting him up for adoption, she decides to raise him on her own. In a new apartment on Academy Street, she becomes friends with her downstairs neighbor, Willa, a down-to-earth married mother of several children who gives Tess practical advice about raising her son. Tess writes her siblings in Ireland and sends them photos of little Theo, but their responses are lukewarm; it is apparent that they, good Catholics, disapprove of what they perceive as her wanton, nontraditional lifestyle. Nothing, however, could be farther from the truth. Tess is more alone than ever. She craves a man, and desperately wishes for some passion in her life. Since she is shy and awkward around other people, and she tends to compare each of the few men she steps out with to her single romantic experience, nothing ever comes from such dates.

Theo grows up as a solitary child who enjoys reading, like his mother. At age fourteen he begins to ask about his father. When he is a little older, Tess shows him a newspaper clipping announcing the wedding of David O'Hara to a Peruvian flight attendant and talks about the culmination of her brief fling. Needing a father figure, Theo begins to grow distant from his mother. In his late teens he moves out to attend college while rooming with friends. Theo and Tess remain in sporadic communication, with long periods of silence between infrequent meetings. At twenty-eight, having become a commodity trader, Theo marries a Jewish lawyer, Jennifer, and fathers two children. Tess, having retired from the hospital, reestablishes contact with Theo and his new family. They all get together regularly for holidays, birthdays, and other occasions, until the horror of September 11, 2001, disrupts their lives.

A final tragedy unfolds that requires Tess's return to Ireland for the first time in many years. Nothing is as she remembered or imagined, prompting a direct comparison of her life in the United States with the world that she left behind in Ireland.

*Academy Street* is the debut novel from Mary Costello, following her well-received story collection *The China Factory* (2012). Downbeat and atmospheric, the story accomplishes much in just over 150 pages. Critics praised Costello's ability to portray such a complicated story in her distinct style, with Maria Crawford writing in a review for the *Financial Times*, "She has a gift for relating even life's most calamitous events in matter-of-fact prose, and in doing so laying bare their true devastation."

Essentially the portrait of a woman who internalizes the effects of traumatic external events over which she has no control, the novel spans more than fifty years, from childhood to senior-citizen status, in the existence of a unique individual. Tess lives a life of quiet desperation, unwilling or unable to take the initiative necessary to better herself or improve her situation, a prisoner who cannot shake off the iron grip of inertia. Physical descriptions of characters are scarce, so readers learn about aspects of their personalities solely through their actions—or in the case of Tess, caught between the old world of her youth and the new world of her mature years, by her failure to

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*Mary Costello first began publishing short stories in 1989, and her first collection of short fiction, The China Factory, was nominated for the Guardian First Book Award and other honors. Her debut novel, Academy Street, won the Eason Novel of the Year award at the 2014 Irish Book Awards.*

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take action. Inwardly, her heart and soul are in constant turmoil; however, outwardly she remains placid. As Sinéad Gleeson notes in a review of the book for the *Guardian*, Tess's subdued lifestyle still speaks volumes: "Hers is a quiet life, but one with an enormous impact on the reader."

The novel is divided into three parts. Part one, told in present tense, details Tess's time in Ireland, the emotional highlight of her life. Part two, in past tense, concerns her time in New York. Part three, also in past tense, sets up the final tragedies that propel her back to Ireland. The story is presented entirely from the third-person limited point of view, which allows inklings of Tess's thoughts and feelings, but with a lesser degree of intimacy than first-person voice would provide.

The strong connections between Ireland and the United States hold the sections together as the story completes a cycle, beginning and ending in personal tragedy. As a young woman in Ireland, Tess dreams of escaping from the predictable future role of wife and mother; in the United States, as a reluctant single mother, she dreams fondly of her youth in Ireland. Neither dream is realistic. Further enhancing the theme, Tess's childhood home was once a haven for victims of the Irish famine, the event that drove many Irish to the United States. Similar to Irish immigrants before her, Tess comes to the United States following in the footsteps of an older sister, and draws her younger brother west after her—and the country destroys them all, in different ways. Tess's hopes for a wonderful new life are dashed by David, yet another Irish immigrant, condemning her to an existence from which, because of her submissive, introspective nature, she does not have the inner strength to escape.

Jack Ewing

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