

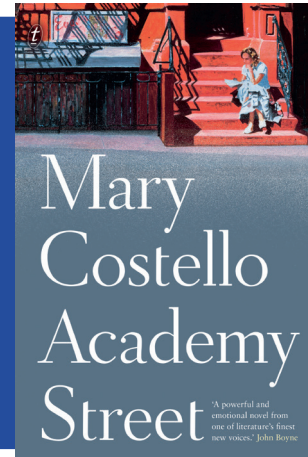
Academy Street

Mary Costello

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Fiction Trade Paperback



Praise for *Academy Street*

'With extraordinary devotion, Mary Costello brings to life a woman who would otherwise have faded into oblivion amid the legions of the meek and the unobtrusive.' J.M. Coetzee

'To recount a life story in a novel is a difficult task. To do so with brevity and unsentimental honesty takes greatness. A powerful and emotional novel from one of literature's finest new voices.' John Boyne

'Intensely moving but never sentimental, *Academy Street* is a profound meditation on what Faulkner called "the human heart in conflict with itself."' Ron Rash

About Mary Costello

Mary Costello lives in Dublin. Her collection of short stories, *The China Factory*, was nominated for the Guardian First Book Award. *Academy Street* is her first novel.

A reader's introduction to *Academy Street*

In less than 200 pages, *Academy Street* distils the essence of a single life lived. A shy, solitary girl who becomes an equally shy and only slightly less solitary woman, Tess Lohan feels herself a person apart. Many of the fundamental emotions and events of her life are common to us all—grief, loneliness, romantic love and sexual desire, maternal love, friendship, intellectual discovery—but in their telling Mary Costello has Tess experience them with an acute poignancy that suggests she feels more and differently.

We first meet Tess as a young girl in her family home waiting for her mother's funeral. Costello divides Tess's life into three parts. There is her childhood and nursing training in Ireland, a life lived in the shadow of her father and with a yearning for something other. At the centre of the novel are Tess's middle years in New York, most of which are spent on Academy Street, the site of her only real friendship. This long period includes her brief affair with David, her years with her son Theo. Then the novel's closing section sees Tess as a 'woman in decline' (158), and finally revisiting

Ireland. Just as Tess tunes in to the rhythm of her new city when she moves to New York, the reader becomes absorbed in the rhythms of the novel.

Death of loved ones is a constant; other types of loss too. Tess frequently feels a sense of an imminent end, but also sometimes a sense of possibility and transformation. And while loneliness and a feeling of separateness are pervasive, in books and art she sees something she recognises.

Academy Street is particularly concerned with the idea of fate and destiny. Even at the very end Costello tells us that Tess is 'obedient to fate' (179). But Tess herself wonders if things might have been different if her mother had not died, and we are left thinking about how much control we have over our own destinies.

Questions for discussion

1. Many novels about women's lives have a romantic relationship as their centre or conclusion. How did you experience reading a novel in which the heroine never finds her 'true love'? Did *Academy Street* challenge your expectations?
2. To what extent is Tess an everywoman? Or even an everyman? How far do you identify with her?
3. What does the novel tell us about what we gain from life? Is life just a matter of 'days to be got through' without Eden or transformation (179)? Is this a pessimistic novel?
4. Adam and Eve are pictured on the wallpaper in the opening scene. At the end of the novel Tess has a vision of 'Adam, Eve, the apple and the angel, all fallen, vanquished, all buried beneath the rubble' (176). Earlier she thinks of David as 'her Adam, her primary man' (138). What is the significance of the Adam and Eve myth in the novel?
5. 'A time will come when no one will talk to her at all, or even look at her. She is a disappearing girl'. (33) Tess feels this when she is mute, but is this also true of her at other times in her life? When is she at her most invisible?

6. Being among people left her feeling lonely, even, at times, endangered. She felt divided from others. Their talk, their dreams, seemed to her incidental, artificial even, something that had to be got through en route to the real conversation, the heart of the matter. She found herself waiting for someone who shared her sensations' (64-65). Why does Tess feel so isolated? Is she different to everyone else, or does she feel her difference more acutely? How many people do you think feel like this? Do you?
7. With Tess such a solitary character, why is family so important to her? Why does she feel that she can live anywhere as long as she has kin there?
8. What does the gypsy girl represent? Why does Tess become mute after seeing her dead body? Why does her connection with Mike bring her words back?
9. Do you have sympathy for Tess's father? If so, did you feel any before Tess came to her realisation of what he himself had had to bear? What about David—do you have sympathy for him? What prevents David from giving himself fully to Tess?
10. Costello describes Tess as having 'a certain passivity, an acquiescence that was ill-suited to change or transformation' (142). Later she describes Tess walking on, 'obedient to fate' (179). Is Tess merely subject to her fate, or does she create it? Is Costello making a point about this particular character or fate more broadly?
11. The Irish immigrants in the novel including Tess see America as a land of possibility. However when Tess eventually returns to visit her home, her sister Evelyn declares that 'all America ever brought this family was misfortune' (176). Which is it? And what would their fate have been had they remained in Ireland, 'a place without dreams, or where dreaming was prohibited' (111)?
12. Tess wonders whether the sense of possibility she feels in New York is 'the very source of her anxiety... the mark of all anxiety: the acute awareness of the endless possibilities that can simultaneously imperil and enhance us, and all that might be lost or gained. And the terrible tension that exists when everything. (111-2). Discuss this quotation in light of your answers to the previous two questions.
13. And another question about fate: Tess herself wonders 'if the self she had become, and the self that Oliver had become, and the self that Claire had been, would have been any different if they'd had a mother who lived' (125). What do you think? What about pivotal moments in your life—how might your life have turned out differently?
14. As David and she stand in silence, Tess 'arrived at a complete understanding of him...she fathomed something deep in him' (84). But soon she realises she 'had known only a small corner of him' and asks 'Is it possible to know anyone ever?' (88). Is it possible? Was she mistaken in her original feeling?
15. As in the quotation above, Costello often describes Tess experiencing intense emotions or realisations that feel fixed and final. Is Tess an inconsistent character, or is this reflective of the way people change through life?
16. How does Tess's dream about an abandoned toddler who bites her finger foreshadow her relationship with her son? Also discuss the scene in which Tess is trapped on the roof while Theo is downstairs. Why has Costello chosen these scenes to have Tess experience such vivid hallucinations. What do they mean?
17. 'The things she had hankered after—encounters with beauty, love, sometimes the numinous—she found in books' (148). Further, books offer a 'degree of fellow-feeling that she had not encountered elsewhere, one which left her feeling less alone. Or more strongly alone' (150). Are such encounters fulfilling enough for her? Does the last line of the last quotation suggest that she takes pleasure in feeling alone?
18. In the quotation above, Tess finds the 'numinous' in books. Discuss the role of the divine, and religion, in *Academy Street*.