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Title	Citation by Áine Hyland for the Conferring on Maeve Binchy of an Honorary Fellowship by the National College of Ireland, 31 October 2008
Authors	Hyland, Áine
Publication date	2008-10-31
Original Citation	Hyland, Á. (2008) 'Citation by Áine Hyland for the Conferring on Maeve Binchy of an Honorary Fellowship by the National College of Ireland', National College of Ireland, 31 October 2008.
Type of publication	Other
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Download date	2026-11-15 12:45:21
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17889

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Citation by Áine Hyland for the

Conferring on Maeve Binchy

of an Honorary Fellowship by the National College of Ireland

31st October 2008.

I am deeply privileged to be asked to read the citation for the conferring of an Honorary Fellowship by the National College of Ireland on Maeve Binchy. Maeve is one of the most popular authors of our time who has brought endless pleasure and happiness to countless millions of people all over the world through her books, short stories and articles.

Maeve was born in Dublin and raised in Dalkey where she now lives only a few hundred yards from her original family home. She went to school in Holy Child Convent in Killiney in the 1950s and went on to UCD on Earlsfort Terrace in 1958, where she was awarded an Honours B.A. in History and French and a Higher Diploma in Education. In an article in the book *"From Newman to New Woman"* where various women graduates of the past 100 years discuss their student days, Maeve describes her four years in UCD and tells us that when she graduated she couldn't get a job teaching in Dublin - this was "a major tragedy at the time" .... so "Instead she went to Cork where I knew nobody at all and nobody knew me and I spent months licking my wounds and telling everyone it was a desperate place instead of getting on with things and realising that you make your own life wherever you are". This is so typical of Maeve – honestly describing what she felt and thought, but getting on with it and "making her own life" as only Maeve can do, and encouraging the rest of us to do the same. She states that during her student days she was "full of observation" – deep and insightful observation that subsequently resulted in many wonderful stories and articles about human nature, written with empathy and understanding.

After some years teaching, Maeve travelled abroad and worked for a time on a kibbutz in Israel. She wrote home weekly, describing life in a country that was constantly on the brink of war. Her father sent one of these letters to the *Irish Times*, she was paid £16 pounds for it (more than a teacher's salary in those days) – and Maeve's writing career was launched. I remember that article in the early 1960s – and my sister, who is now a Loreto nun, telling me with pride

that she had been in Maeve's class in UCD. Whatever Maeve's recollections of her UCD days might have been, as far as my sister was concerned, Maeve was the life and soul of the class during her years there. I also remember looking forward to her weekly newspaper column in those years, in which she provided a wonderfully colourful and interesting commentary on the ordinary comings and goings of life.

Maeve subsequently married Gordon Snell, and to use her own words "it was great and is still great". She is a devoted family person and continues to be close, literally and metaphorically, to her brother and sisters, some of whom are here with us today.

Maeve's writing career has been prodigious. (I had to look up the spelling of prodigious on my computer and the thesaurus told me that it means huge, vast, copious, gigantic, immense, enormous – all words which describe Maeve's literary output so well). When she announced in 2000 that she was going to retire from writing, I was among those fans who were devastated and wondered how we could survive without a new Maeve Binchy book every year or so. Thankfully, the word "retired" has a different meaning for Maeve than it has for the rest of us, and since her retirement, Maeve has gone on to publish some of her finest works – *Quentins* in 2002; *Nights of Rain and Stars* in 2004 and *Whitethorn Woods* in 2006. Her recent book *"Heart and Soul"* is top of the best seller list in Ireland, Australia and Canada and is receiving rave reviews all over the world.

I was in Edmonton Canada last week and read a riveting review of the book in the Canadian "Globe and Mail". The reviewer – a man – started his review by sharing a secret –"Every once in a while, I grow weary of being a man and I don't even know why. I have little to complain about. There's the fishing, the duck hunting, the late-night poker games, the meat smoker my wife bought me for my birthday. There's the adoration of my daughters …". Nevertheless, this reviewer sometimes finds himself taking stock of his life and wondering what he might be missing. He goes on to say "There is a niggling fear that all men share, but rarely dare to voice: Are women having more fun that we are? And if so, shouldn't we be spying on them?" He discovered that "One way to do this … is for men to read *Heart and Soul* …. for it offers a window onto women's world and into the issues that Maeve Binchy explores in this book –

poverty, religion, marriage and faithfulness" . He concludes by saying that "it's in the untangling of the web that holds the characters (of the book) together, that the devotion of Binchy's millions-strong readership lies, and they, in their legions will not be disappointed".

Maeve's literary genius is matched by her humility and her personal generosity and openness. It would be remiss of me at this gathering not to refer to her generosity and kindness to the students of the National College of Ireland where she initiated and led a writing club to motivate and encourage aspiring writers. This club led to the publication of the book *The Maeve Binchy Writer's Club,* which was launched in NCI last March and which contains her 20 weekly letters to her students as well as contributions from ten of the guest speakers on the programme. Maeve believes that "everyone is capable of telling a story" – but I doubt if there are many others in the world who can tell a story as grippingly and sensitively, as Maeve can. Everybody entering the portals of the NCI in recent months have seen Maeve and Gordon's "chairs" in the foyer – a happy reminder of their support and kindness to the students and staff there.

Maeve's cheerful and outgoing personality is an inspiration to all of us. Like everyone else, she has had her ups and downs in life, and as we know from *Heart and Soul,* and other writings, she has had her own health issues to cope with in recent years. But nothing deflects her from her positive and optimistic outlook on life – an outlook which is infectious and catching. Her incredible openness to strangers and her willingness to meet with and chat to her fans, has left many of them speechless. When preparing this citation, I heard more than one story of her hospitality to complete strangers who landed on her doorstep in Dalkey, curious to see where this extraordinary writer lives. To their amazement, they found themselves in her sitting room having a cup of tea and chatting about anything and everything.

We thank you, Maeve, for the joy you have brought to so many people through your writings over the past four decades and more. You have been a beacon of light and hope to many of your readers in their darker days. You have been a wonderful ambassador for Ireland throughout the world. To celebrate and recognise your outstanding contribution the National College of Ireland is delighted to confer on you this Honorary Fellowship.