

# Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

## 2014 WINNER

### A GIRL IS A HALF-FORMED THING BY EIMEAR MCBRIDE

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Eimear McBride trained at Drama Centre London. Her debut novel *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* received a number of awards including the Goldsmiths Prize, the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and Irish Novel of the Year. She has also published *The Lesser Bohemians* and most recently *Strange Hotel*. She occasionally writes and reviews for the *Guardian*, *TLS* and the *New Statesman*.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

Eimear McBride's debut tells the story of a young woman's relationship with her brother, and the long shadow cast by his childhood brain tumour. Not so much a stream of consciousness, as an unconscious railing against a life that makes little sense, and a shocking and intimate insight into the thoughts, feelings and chaotic sexuality of a vulnerable and isolated protagonist. To read *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing* is to plunge inside its narrator's head, experiencing her world firsthand.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

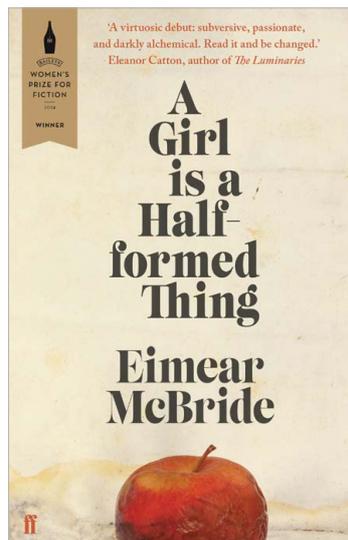
The first thing we notice about this book is the disjointed and dissociated style in which

McBride's unnamed narrator tells her story. This disjointedness tells us everything we need to know about her mental state, vulnerability and the effect that the shattering event of her beloved brother's childhood cancer has had on her.

Though the style may be difficult to read, McBride reminds us that this is in fact closer to 'reality' than the highly artificial and controlled narrative voice we are generally used to reading. And it is McBride's astonishing insight, brutal detail, acute sensitivity and mordant wit that make it bearable for the reader.

McBride's protagonist is a girl who tries to escape trauma with sex, which becomes increasingly violent as time goes on and as her brother's cancer returns. She has a troubling, abusive relationship with her uncle,

which begins as a rape, becomes for a time somewhat consensual (although we doubt the character's ability to discern healthy relationships) and returns to abusive and dangerous at the end. In depicting this difficult relationship, McBride reminds us of the emotional complexities of sexual abuse, especially with vulnerable young people. At the end, the young woman commits suicide, having been overtaken by despair.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

Control, and the lack of control we have over life, are very much key in McBride's book. First, the main character's brother's brain tumour is an uncontrollable bolt from the blue, a seeming act of God – and, when her brother's cancer returns, it can no longer be controlled by the drugs. The main character seeks to control her desire by subjecting herself to violence, but in the end finds that she is unable to escape the control that her uncle has over her. Her suicide is the last way that she can take control, but the one way that she loses her life altogether. Does she succeed in her personal struggle to remain intact through intense trauma? Do you think that the main character ever had any control over her life, or was she essentially doomed from the start? Do we ever really have any control over our lives, or is it an illusion?

Last, all this is told in an apparently uncontrolled stream of consciousness style, which is nonetheless stringently created and controlled by the author.



## QUESTIONS

Do you like the narrative style of this book or did you find it difficult? Why?

Why do you think Eimear McBride doesn't give her main character a name, or situate the story in any recognisable historical context?

Are you sympathetic to the main character? Why/why not?

What truth about girls (if any) is McBride's book telling?

## NEXT STEPS

Think of a title that makes a statement about girlhood, like *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. So, perhaps yours could begin *A Girl is . . .* and then fill in the gaps according to your thoughts – or you could use a completely different structure. Then, write a short story that somehow explores girlhood according to the way you have described it in the title. What do you want to say about girls? What was important to you as a girl or as a teen?

**“ A GIRL IS A HALF-FORMED THING IS A REALLY ASTONISHING BOOK. IT WAS VERY UNLIKE ANYTHING ELSE WE, THE JUDGES, READ. IT'S INCREDIBLY ORIGINAL. IT HAS A RAW ENERGY WE ALL RESPONDED TO. IT HAS REAL LYRICAL QUALITIES EVEN THOUGH THE SUBJECT MATTER CAN SOMETIMES BE SO SHOCKING ”**

HELEN FRASER,  
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2014

Sex is a subject we don't often see in literary novels in as much detail as we do in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. Write a story about sex. You can draw on your experiences, or imagine something more in the realm of fantasy. Is it difficult? How detailed will you be? Consider the emotions, the mental process as well as the physicality. What relevance does sex have in the story? How do the characters experience sex – positively, negatively, ambivalently? Why? What's their backstory?

Will you use a particular style to write this story? Even choosing a point of view character or a past/present tense will have a strong effect on the finished story.

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*THE STRANGE HOTEL* BY EIMEAR MCBRIDE

*THE LOVER* BY MARGUERITE DURAS

*THE COUNTRY GIRLS* BY EDNA O'BRIEN