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I'll Know It When I See It: A Daughter's Search For Home In Ireland



Synopsis

As a young girl, Alice Carey realized that “home” can mean different things. The only child of poor Irish immigrants, her isolated childhood in a cold-water flat in Queens is transformed when her mother becomes the maid to legendary Broadway producer Jean Dalrymple. In Miss Dalrymple’s Upper East Side townhouse, young Alice absorbs with delight a sophisticated theatrical culture that includes encounters with such notables as Jed Harris and Marilyn Monroe. Then, a visit to Ireland with her mother thrusts the girl into another novel culture, one that simultaneously enchants and traumatizes her. When Alice returns to Ireland as an adult, she and her husband serendipitously find and fall in love with a ruined Georgian farmhouse. As they begin to convert the stables into a livable cottage, Alice unearths buried memories of a childhood played out in wildly divergent homes. *I’ll Know It When I See It* is the witty and rueful examination of her struggles to make sense of—and peace with—her recollections of a bittersweet past. It is a book certain to appeal to anyone who’s ever loved, lost, and reclaimed a home of their own.

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Customer Reviews

Although the author opens with a visit to her mother’s native Ireland at 12 and ends with lighting candles in her new home in County Cork four decades later, this is no nostalgic memoir about getting back to your roots. Alice Carey has crafted a tough-minded examination of her complicated relationship with her heritage, a warm tribute to the theatrical free spirits who helped liberate her

from an unhappy childhood. She grew up in Queens; her father often hit her and flew into a rage when his wife dared to augment the family's meager finances by working as a maid for Broadway producer Jed Harris. Helping Mammie in the afternoons, Alice glimpsed a glamorous, sophisticated world beyond the constraints of Catholic school and Celtic fatalism. She moved to Greenwich Village in her teens and made her life as a Manhattanite with a weekend home in Fire Island. When AIDS decimated that community in the 1990s, she and her husband moved to Ireland. Making an 18th-century farmhouse habitable is a black comedy Carey describes with a sardonic wit that echoes her Irish forebears and gay friends but is uniquely her own (she names "the Seven Dwarves of Restoration: Happy, Reluctant, Fearful, Suspicious, Wary, Hopeful, and Doubtful"). Her journey towards a new identity as "a real New Yorker living in Ireland" is all the more moving because it is chronicled with sharp perceptiveness and without sentimentality. --Wendy Smith

While ostensibly the story of an Irish-American woman's return to the rural country of her forebears, Carey intercuts the story of choosing and restoring a Georgian-Irish "ruin" with her difficult childhood and adolescence in Astoria, Queens, with her sporadically violent janitor father and overworked mother. Yet Carey's childhood is turned around in the early 1960s when her mother begins work as a maid to Broadway producer Jean Dalrymple, and Carey is taken under the wings of Dalrymple's theater people, including famed director Jed Harris. She tells anecdotes of life with the producer's office boys (the "lads") and her renovation ("we were greeted by the Seven Dwarves of Restoration: Happy, Reluctant, Fearful, Suspicious, Wary, Hopeful, and Doubtful") in a marvelous high-low, wryly camp admixture that is as winning as it seems unique, even when telling of a disastrous childhood visit "home" to Ireland (and her pedophilic-priest uncle's wiles). If Carey only sketches out huge swaths of her life her years as a young actress in Greenwich Village and Fire Island's Cherry Grove, her husband's role at GMHC and the full toll that AIDS has taken on their lives, her battle with eosinophil myalgia, the renovations of "the Big House" as opposed to the stables they begin with one looks forward to further installments in this Irish-American partial reverse migration. The book ends with Carey's mother's inglorious death (echoed in Princess Diana's) and the christening of the stables as "Never Faileth." Carey upholds that credo beautifully here. (Feb.) Forecast: While Carey did not quite endure the same trials and tribulations as the brothers McCourt, her idiom and her New York story are firmly in that tradition but on Carey's own terms. The book embraces a variety of demographics and subgenres (feminist, gay and lesbian, New York-philic, emigrant, children of abuse, coming of age) effortlessly, and should cross over to excellent sales. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

A nice book, it arrived on time.

I found this to be an engaging read, a well constructed presentation with minimal "low" points. I would heartily recommend it to anyone.

Beautiful imagery of Ireland then and now, as well as absolutely magnificent writing, but it seemed to be half Carey's journey to Ireland and half a name dropping of famous people she knew. That took away from the purpose of the book, just in my honest opinion.

A friend, whom I accompanied on my first trip to Ireland last May, lent me Alice Carey's memoir "I'll Know It When I See It," knowing how enamored I have become of things Irish. Alice Carey, as a clever and witty story teller, has a natural knack for sizing up situations and characterizing people that seems to be an Irish trait. Having lived for a while in NYC, I was amused by her reflections on the city, its rapid neighborhood changes, and at the same time dismayed at the stringent life she endured in Queens as a youngster, made especially difficult by a father whose abusive anger was probably rooted in the frustration of economic and social deprivation in a city where extreme wealth so clearly co-exists with poverty. Alice's salvation resides in her mother, "mammie," whom she adored and who adored her. By the author's literary skill, mammie comes alive and endearing. One example is the episode where she and her mother attended the Broadway opening of "Peter Pan" starring Mary Martin, -a tale told with vivid detail. In her account of her ambivalent search for her roots in Ireland, I very much appreciated the account of her and her husband's finding and rehabilitating the Protestant mansion and rescuing the Catholic cottage from the cows near Bantry where they settled before tackling the manor house. That tale of renovation and acclimation would be a fitting sequel. Perhaps Alice Carey will treat us to that tale. A delicious read that ended all too soon.

Alice Carey read at the West Side YMCA's Writer's Voice on February 18, 2005. This is from my introduction to the event. For most people, what probably drew them, or will draw them to this memoir, this author, this event, is one word in the subtitle of this marvelous book: Ireland. Whether you are as Irish as the characters described within "I'll Know it When I See It," or have a last name that sounds more like...Raucher...for instance, the word Ireland still conjures up a multitude of images, of the place itself, its long, difficult and complex history, and how it is also interwoven with

the myths and tales of this country. And many of those images have little connection to any reality about the place; but, nevertheless...the romantic image of Ireland persists. But "I'll Know it When I See It" is not a soft clover travel guide; for one, we spend as much time in Astoria, Queens and on 55th Street right here in Manhattan as we do in County Cork. The events that take place not five miles from the spot where this reading takes place are as indelibly recalled, and as potent for our narrator, as any that take place across the Atlantic, on that verdant island. But, to this reader at least, the key word in the title is not Ireland; it is something even deeper and more universal: Home. In this moving yet remarkably unsentimental book, Alice Carey makes it clear that no one finds "home" without a cost, a reckoning of what is lost. Whether it is letting go of--leaving--what one thought was their "home," or coming to terms with simply letting go of what other people expect you to accept as your place in the world, "I'll Know it When I See It" tells a powerful and entrancing tale. One that, because of Alice Carey's expert hand and ear for the beauty and power of language, her ability to make her words come alive on the page, takes us right into the places she, her family and dear friends inhabit, or even only visit.

Listening to Alice Carey describe those moments on the deck of the RMS Mauretania as she and her Mammie approach Ireland reminds us of the overwhelming power of words to paint pictures in our mind's eye. Whether it is a description of the cats on the mantel at Miss D's, the butcher in Astoria or the sheep on the way to Skellig Michael? you can picture with ease all that Ms. Carey describes. And if that were not enough, you can also hear the words. The dialogue on every page lends itself to be read aloud. And part of the joy of this book is ?hearing? Ms. Carey as you read about each event and leg of her journey. We all remember the events of our past with varying degrees of honesty and clarity. Ms. Carey takes a critical look at the milestones of her life? through the eyes of someone who has made the journey home with awe and affection. For everyone who loves words, stories and laughter? this is a must read!

What a wonderful book! The poignant tale of a young girl raised in a difficult environment juxtaposed so beautifully with the story of a grown woman trying to make sense of her childhood is really a marvel. This book is full of interesting contraposition. The flamboyancy of Fire Island versus the conservatism of Ireland, the poverty of her parent's circumstances versus the wealth of her mother's employer, Alice Carey's conservative Irish-Catholic relatives contrasted with her many gay friends, the hypocrisy of the priests and nuns who inform her upbringing- all made for a captivating journey. I loved the skillful means by which she brought these characters to life as much as I loved her ability

to convey the essence of the emotions of a given moment in time. All in all, a terrific book!

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