

Maeve Binchy

**BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
CIRCLE OF FRIENDS AND
THE GLASS LAKE**

**THE
NATIONAL
BEST
SELLER**

The Copper Beech

**"A BOOK WITH A
DIFFERENCE...
YOU'LL TAKE IT HOME TO
LEND TO YOUR BEST FRIEND.
AND WHAT BEST FRIEND
WOULDN'T WELCOME
THE NEW MAEVE BINCHY?"**

**—The New York Times
Book Review**

The COPPER BEECH

MAEVE
BINCHY

A Dell Book

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**PRAISE FOR MAEVE BINCHY—THE WRITER
THE NEW YORK TIMES CALLS “A MASTER
STORYTELLER,” “A REMARKABLY GIFTED
WRITER,” “A WONDERFUL STUDENT OF HUMAN
NATURE”—AND HER SPECTACULAR BEST
SELLER THE COPPER BEECH**

“CHARMING AND COMPELLING! . . . Binchy is a consummate storyteller with a unique ability to draw readers into her tales of Irish life. Here again she mines sources rich in plot and character to produce a captivating narrative.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Binchy moves gracefully and skillfully among her characters . . . and cleverly allows tension to build within the chapters and across them. The spell Binchy casts makes us innocents again.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

“*The Copper Beech* is a love poem to Shancarrig, a sweet and touching portrait of a little town. . . . The characters are endearing and sharply drawn . . . Binchy gives an insider’s perspective.”

—*Book Page*

“Her perception of human nature is pervasive . . . she adroitly interweaves the lives, shifting viewpoints as she shifts from the consciousness of one to that of another. Not many novels these days offer as much hope and lightness as *The Copper Beech*.”

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Please turn the page for more extraordinary acclaim . . .

"EXTRAORDINARY! . . . Binchy once again demonstrates her magical ability to build strong, convincing characters. She is an amazingly talented writer out of a rich tradition of Irish storytelling. To that tradition she brings her own distinctive touch of humor and compassion."

—*Sunday Journal* (Providence)

"A gifted storyteller . . . Binchy writes from the heart."

—*Cape Cod Times*

"She does it again! . . . Her characters appear as real people we know, as alive and as solid and as marked by time as the copper beech in the Shancarrig schoolyard."

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"DELIGHTFUL . . . FILLED WITH SURPRISES! These tales are studies in relationships. Many of them involve romance, but the author also examines the bonds between mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, siblings and friends. The paths of these people are fraught with both tragedy and serendipity."

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—The Milwaukee Journal

"Maeve Binchy plunges beneath the calm surface of a small town to reveal the inner hopes, dreams and fears of its residents in her latest book. She brings her distinctive touch of humor and compassion to her tales of lives and human nature in her native Ireland."

—Cincinnati Enquirer

"COMPELLING . . . EXCITING . . . Binchy is a consummate storyteller [who] plunges into the depths of human relationships."

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"Ms. Binchy . . . is a generous writer—generous in her pages, generous with incidents, generous with laughter, generous with tears."

—The Dallas Morning News

"READING ONE OF MAEVE BINCHY'S NOVELS IS LIKE COMING HOME."

—The Washington Post

By the same author

THE LILAC BUS
CIRCLE OF FRIENDS
SILVER WEDDING
FIREFLY SUMMER
ECHOES
LIGHT A PENNY CANDLE
LONDON TRANSPORTS

To dearest Gordon, with all my love

... ..

Life was good at the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Shancarrig. The parish priest, Monsignor O'Toole, was a courteous, frail man who let the curate run things his own way. Father Gunn wished that more could be done for the people of the parish so that they didn't have to stand at the railway station waving goodbye to sons and daughters, emigrating to England and America. He wished that there were fewer damp cottages where tuberculosis could flourish, filling the graveyard with people too young to die. He wished that tired women did not have to bear so many children, children for whom there was often scant living. But he knew that all the young men who had been in the seminary with him were in similar parishes wishing the same thing. He didn't think he was a man who could change the world. For one thing he didn't *look* like a man who could change the world. Father Gunn's eyes were like two currants in a bun.

There had been a Mr. Kennedy long ago, long before Father Gunn's time, but he had died of pneumonia. Every year he was prayed for at Mass on the anniversary of his death, and every year Mrs. Kennedy's sad face achieved what seemed to be an impossible feat, which was a still more sorrowful appearance. But even though it was nowhere near her late husband's anniversary now, she was pretty gloomy, and it was all to do with Shancarrig School.

Mrs. Kennedy would have thought since it was a question of a visit from the Bishop that *she*, as the priests' housekeeper, should have been in charge of everything. She didn't want to impose, she said many a time, but really had Father Gunn got it quite clear? Was it really expected that those teachers, those lay teachers above at the schoolhouse and the children

that were taught in it, were really in charge of the ceremony?

"They're not used to bishops," said Mrs. Kennedy, implying that she had her breakfast, dinner, and tea with the higher orders.

But Father Gunn had been adamant. The occasion was the dedication of the school, a bishop's blessing, a ceremony to add to the legion of ceremonies for Holy Year, but it was to involve the children, the teachers. It wasn't something run by the presbytery.

"But Monsignor O'Toole is the manager," Mrs. Kennedy protested. The elderly frail parish priest played little part in the events of the parish, it was all done by his bustling energetic curate.

In many ways, of course, it would have been much easier to let Mrs. Kennedy take charge, to have allowed her get her machine into motion and organize the tired cakes, the heavy pastries, the big pots of tea that characterized so many church functions. But Father Gunn had stood firm. This event was for the school and the school would run it.

Thinking of Mrs. Kennedy standing there hatted and gloved and sorrowfully disapproving, he asked God to let the thing be done right, to inspire young Jim and Nora Kelly, the teachers, to set it up properly. And to keep that mob of young savages that they taught in some kind of control.

After all, God had an interest in the whole thing too, and making the Holy Year meaningful in the parish was important. God must want it to be a success, not just to impress the Bishop but so that the children would remember their school and all the values they learned there. Father Gunn was very fond of the school, the little stone building under the huge copper beech. He loved going up there on visits and watching the little heads bent over their copybooks.

"Procrastination is the thief of time" they copied diligently.

"What does that mean, do you think?" he had asked once.

"We don't know what it means, Father. We only have to copy it out," explained one of the children helpfully.

They weren't too bad really, the children of Shancarrig—he heard their Confessions regularly. The most terrible sin, and the one for which he had to remember to apportion a heavy penance, was scutting on the back of a lorry. As far as Father Gunn could work out this was holding on to the back of a moving vehicle and being borne along without the driver's knowledge. It not unnaturally drew huge rage and disapproval from parents and passersby, so he had to reflect the evilness of it by a decade of the Rosary, which was almost unheard of in the canon of children's penances. But scutting apart, they were good children, weren't they? They'd do the school and Shancarrig credit when the Bishop came, wouldn't they?

The children talked of little else all term. The teachers told them over and over what an honor it was. The Bishop didn't normally go to small schools like this. They would have the chance to see him on their own ground, unlike so many children in the country who had never seen him until they were confirmed in the big town.

They had spent days cleaning the place up. The windows had been painted, and the door. The bicycle shed had been tidied so that you wouldn't recognize it. The classrooms had been polished till they gleamed. Perhaps His Grace would tour the school. It wasn't certain, but every eventuality had to be allowed for.

Long trestle tables would be arranged under the huge copper beech tree which dominated the school

yard. Clean white sheets would cover them and Mrs. Barton, the local dressmaker, had embroidered some lovely edging so that they wouldn't look like sheets. There would be jars of flowers, bunches of lilac and the wonderful purple orchids that grow wild in Barna Woods in the month of June.

A special table with Holy Water and a really good white cloth would be there so that His Grace could take the silver spoon and sprinkle the Water, dedicating the school again to God. The children would sing "Faith of Our Fathers," and because it was near to the Feast of Corpus Christi they would also sing "Sweet Sacrament Divine." They rehearsed it every single day, they were word perfect now.

Whether or not the children were going to be allowed to partake of the feast itself was a somewhat gray area. Some of the braver ones had inquired, but the answers were always unsatisfactory.

"We'll see," Mrs. Kelly had said.

"Don't always think of your bellies," Mr. Kelly had said.

It didn't look terribly hopeful.

Even though it was all going to take place at the school, they knew that it wasn't really centered around the children. It was for the parish.

There would be something, of course, they knew that. But only when the grown-ups were properly served. There might be just plain bits of bread and butter with a little scraping of sandwich paste on them, or the duller biscuits when all the iced and chocolate-sided ones had gone.

The feast was going to be a communal effort from Shancarrig and so they each knew some aspect of it. There was hardly a household that wouldn't be contributing.

"There are going to be bowls of jelly and cream with strawberries on top," Nessa Ryan was able to tell.

"That's for grown-ups!" Eddie Barton felt this was unfair.

"Well, my mother is making the jellies and giving the cream. Mrs. Kelly said it would be whipped in the school and the decorations put on at the last moment in case they ran."

"And chocolate cake. Two whole ones," Leo Murphy said.

It seemed very unfair that this should all be for the Bishop and priests and great crowds of multifarious adults in front of whom they had all been instructed, or ordered, to behave well.

Sergeant Keane would be there they had been told, as if he was about to take them all personally to the jail in the big town if there was a word astray.

"They'll have to give some to us," Maura Brennan said. "It wouldn't be fair otherwise."

Father Gunn heard her say this and marveled at the innocence of children. For a child like young Maura, daughter of Paudie who drank every penny that came his way, to believe still in fairness was touching.

"There'll be bound to be *something* left over for you and your friends, Maura," he said to her, hoping to spread comfort, but Maura's face reddened. It was bad to be overheard by the priest wanting food on a holy occasion. She hung back and let her hair fall over her face.

But Father Gunn had other worries.

The Bishop was a thin, silent man. He didn't walk to places but was more inclined to glide. Under his long soutane or his regal-style vestments he might well have had wheels rather than feet. He had already said he would like to process rather than drive from the railway station to the school. Very nice if you were a

gliding person and it was a cool day. Not so good, however, if it was a hot day and the Bishop would notice the unattractive features of Shancarrig.

Like Johnny Finn's pub where Johnny had said that out of deference to the occasion he would close his doors but he was not going to dislodge the sitters.

"They'll sing. They'll be disrespectful," Father Gunn had pleaded.

"Think what they'd be like if they were out on the streets, Father." The publican had been firm.

So much was spoken about the day and so much was made of the numbers that would attend that the children grew increasingly nervous.

"There's no proof at all that we'll get *any* jelly and cream," Niall Hayes said.

"I heard no talk of special bowls or plates or forks."

"And if they let people like Nellie Dunne loose they'll eat all before them." Nessa Ryan bit her lip with anxiety.

"We'll help ourselves," said Foxy Dunne.

They looked at him round-eyed. Everything would be counted, they'd be murdered, he must be mad.

"I'll sort it out on the day," he said.

Father Gunn was not sleeping well for the days preceding the ceremony. It was a great kindness that he hadn't heard Foxy's plans.

Mrs. Kennedy said that she would have some basic emergency supplies ready in the kitchen of the presbytery, just in case. Just in case. She said it several times.

Father Gunn would not give her the satisfaction of asking just in case *what*. He knew only too well. She meant in case his foolish confidence in allowing lay people up at a small stone schoolhouse run a huge public religious ceremony was misplaced. She shook

her head and dressed in black from head to foot, in honor of the occasion.

There had been three days of volunteer work trying to beautify the station. No money had been allotted by CIE, the railways company, for repainting. The stationmaster, Jack Kerr, had been most unwilling to allow a party of amateur painters loose on it. His instructions did not include playing fast and loose with company property, painting it all the colors of the rainbow.

"We'll paint it gray," Father Gunn had begged.

But no. Jack Kerr wouldn't hear of it, and he was greatly insulted at the weeding and slashing down of dandelions that took place.

"The Bishop likes flowers," Father Gunn said sadly.

"Let him bring his own bunch of them to wear with his frock then," said Mattie the postman, the one man in Shancarrig foolhardy enough to say publicly that he did not believe in God and wouldn't therefore be hypocritical enough to attend Mass, or the Sacraments.

"Mattie, this is not the time to get me into a theological discussion," implored Father Gunn.

"We'll have it whenever you're feeling yourself again, Father." Mattie was unfailingly courteous and rather too patronizing for Father Gunn's liking.

But Mattie had a good heart. He transported clumps of flowers from Barna Woods and planted them in the station beds. "Tell Jack they grew when the earth was disturbed," he advised. He had correctly judged the stationmaster to be unsound about nature and uninterested in gardening.

"I think the place is perfectly all right," Jack Kerr was heard to grumble as they all stood waiting for the Bishop's train. He looked around his transformed railway station and saw nothing different.

The Bishop emerged from the train. He was shaped

like an S hook, Father Gunn thought sadly. He was graceful, bending or straightening as he spoke to each person. He was extraordinarily gracious, he didn't fuss or fumble, he remembered everyone's names, unlike Father Gunn who had immediately forgotten the names of the two self-important clerics who had accompanied him.

Some of the younger children, dressed in the little white surplices of altar boys, stood ready to lead the procession up the town.

The sun shone mercilessly. Father Gunn had prayed unsuccessfully for one of the wet summer days they had been having recently. Even that would be better than this oppressive heat.

The Bishop seemed interested in everything he saw. They left the station and walked the narrow road to what might be called the center of town had Shancarrig been a larger place. They paused at the Church of the Holy Redeemer for His Grace to say a silent prayer at the foot of the altar. Then they walked past the bus stop, the little line of shops, Ryan's Commercial Hotel, and The Terrace where the doctor, the solicitor, and other people of importance lived.

The Bishop seemed to nod approvingly when places looked well, and to frown slightly as he passed the poorer cottages. But perhaps that was all in Father Gunn's mind. Maybe His Grace was unaware of his surroundings and was merely saying his prayers. As they walked along Father Gunn was only too conscious of the smell from the River Grane, low and muddy. As they crossed the bridge he saw out of the corner of his eye a few faces at the window of Johnny Finn Noted for Best Drinks. He prayed they wouldn't find it necessary to open the window.

Mattie the postman sat laconically on an upturned

barrel. He was one of the only spectators since almost every other citizen of Shancarrig was waiting at the school.

The Bishop stretched out his hand very slightly as if offering his ring to be kissed.

Mattie inclined his head very slightly and touched his cap. The gesture was not offensive, but neither was it exactly respectful. If the Bishop understood it, he said nothing. He smiled to the right and the left, his thin aristocratic face impervious to the heat. Father Gunn's face was a red round puddle of sweat.

The first sign of the schoolhouse was the huge ancient beech tree, a copper beech that shaded the playground. Then you saw the little stone schoolhouse that had been built at the turn of the century. The dedication ceremony had been carefully written out in advance and scrutinized by these bureaucratic clerics who seemed to swarm around the Bishop. They had checked every word in case Father Gunn might have included a major heresy or sacrilege. The purpose of it all was to consecrate the school, and the future of all the young people it would educate, to God in this Holy Year. Father Gunn failed to understand why this should be considered some kind of doctrinal minefield. All he was trying to do was to involve the community at the right level, to make them see that their children were their hope and their future.

For almost three months the event had been heralded from the altar at Mass. And the pious hope expressed that the whole village would be present for the prayers and the dedication. The prayers, hymns, and short discourse should take forty-five minutes, and then there would be an hour for tea.

As they plodded up the hill Father Gunn saw that everything was in place.

A crowd of almost two hundred people stood