

## Hungry Trails Review

**The first Sunday I attended Mass, Father O'Brien's sermon was special. "My dear people," he began. "Today I address those in the congregation who have travelled across a perilous ocean. Those who fled the blight, the hunger, the disease and the fever in the year we call "Black '47". You arrived here, in the land of opportunity, to gain employment, rent or buy houses, create or settle families, and, like those who arrived before you, educate your children in the tradition of your Catholic faith. I salute you, the survivors."**

The horrors of the Irish potato famine of 1847 are well-documented and laid out in heartbreaking detail in this story. As seen through the eyes of Julie Foley, a sixteen-year-old young Irish girl from Attymass who clings to her own dreams of one day becoming a teacher. Yet when the blight strikes, and is introduced to the reader at the outset of the book, Julie's dreams are waylaid as the tragedy unfolds. Not only is she faced with the responsibility of helping her family survive, she must endure watching the families around her starve, the corpses strewn across the landscape from lack of food and backbreaking work, and her own little sister dwindle away as a result.

But the Foley family is blessed in several respects. Not only are they a resilient and close family with strong faith, but they are blessed to have friends who can afford to help them out in their times of need. These friends provide an opportunity for the family to emigrate to Canada. After a harsh journey to the docks, and days of waiting for the ship to arrive, then the family endures unimaginable conditions aboard the *Elizabeth and Sarah*, where more people starve and face life-threatening diseases.

Yet, Julie's dreams still thrive, even as she meets a young man, Fionn, on the ship who has his own dreams of life on the continent – of life in New York. Julie's family arrives in Montreal, and settle in Griffintown, where Julie soon takes up employment with a Irish widow as a servant in the lavish district of Mount Royal.

Again and again, Julie's faith is tested as one tragedy after another strikes, even in this new land, that of devastating floods, the loss of loved ones, and time and again, her dream of being a teacher is waylaid when she is forced to take care of her family. But in the process, she grows up and through an unusual friendship with a Algonquin Indian woman (who has converted to Catholicism), and her continued correspondence with Fionn, the sun rises on her dreams, and by the end of the book, the reader is hopeful that Julie's story will continue far beyond the last page.

For a certainty, the themes of this novel, that of the enduring human spirit in the face of dire conditions, translates well for a reader facing tragedies in our modern day. Julie's qualities of loyalty, resiliency, faith, compassion, and bravery are well-fleshed out in her character, as well as the normal human tendency to question their own faith and the role God plays in their life in the midst of all the suffering; (much like Job in the scriptures).

**My head burned with the questions, and I couldn't stop them. I thought about speaking to Da, but his faith was certain as glue. Held him together no matter what troubles befell us. There had been a time when my faith was that strong. But now the doubts persisted...**

The narrative is especially well-written and flows easily, and for the most part is one which a reader can read well into the night without stopping. For an immersive insight into the Irish potato famine and the political red-tape of life in Ireland and the oppression of the British government at that time, plus the brutal conditions of the Irish poor, then this is a book to read to fully engage with the travails of the

period, not to mention to hone up on the history. Of particular interest to this reviewer was the relationship between Julie and the Indian woman, and how her down-to-earth beliefs helped ground Julie in her wavering faith, and the beautiful illustrations of the simplicity of watching the birds in the sky, which hark back to Julie's faith and the scriptures which refer to God's taking notice of a small sparrow which falls to the ground. This is definitely a story in which the theme of faith resonates.

**“...Sure these wee birds have only the stars and the same troubles as us.” Katherina smiled and nodded. “Our Creator is a wonder indeed. Reading the stars, they fly to southern border of United States, cross Gulf of Mexico to land as strange to them as this land strange to your family.”**

**“If they listen out for the grey jays that are known for singing from tree to tree to guide a lost and starving hunter home, they may find words for the horrors of a world that has taken so much.”**

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**“Hungry Trails” by Máire Malone receives five stars and the “Highly Recommended” award of excellence from The Historical Fiction Company**