

The family that
inspired the hit TV series

MRS BROWN'S
BOYS



The Mammy

BRENDAN
O'CARROLL

O'BRIEN

The first book in the MRS BROWNE trilogy

The Mammy

**Agnes Browne is a strong woman - strong
enough to cope with widowhood, seven
children, a tenement flat and the daily grind of her
Moore Street stall.**

**But even strong women need a little help and
a dream of their own to keep them going**

...

Praise for THE MAMMY

**'Brendan O'Carroll is a born storyteller'
THE INDEPENDENT**

**'A sure tonic'
CORK EXAMINER**

**'Roddy Doyle had better watch out'
CONNACHT TRIBUNE**

THE MAMMY

Brendan O'Carroll



THE O'BRIEN PRESS
DUBLIN

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About the Author

ALSO BY BRENDAN O'CARROLL

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Introduction

I was sitting in the lobby of a Hilton Hotel in Orlando, Florida, when this book was born; it was 1994 and the Republic of Ireland had qualified for the finals of the World Cup. I'd just begun to make a name for myself in Ireland as a comic and Tim O'Connor, Head of Sport for RTE (Irish TV) had employed me to travel with the team on their adventure and do some colour pieces to camera for the audience at home. However, my job was to do a three-minute piece every second day. Well, anybody who knows me will tell you that so little work would drive me insane. So to while away the time, I bought a legal pad and a pen and began to write.

But what to write? Some months earlier the magnificent actor Gabriel Byrne had sent me a book by Syd Field, entitled *Screenplay*. This book is amazing and a must-read for any aspiring script writer. It suggests that a scriptwriter should compose a 'back story' for the main character in their movie. Just twenty pages that cover his life before we meet him. The scriptwriter may never actually use any of this, but it really makes a difference when the character meets an obstacle in the film – knowing his back story gives an idea of how HE would get around it. So that's what I decided to do. But I didn't have a movie.

What I did have was a five-minute comedy soap called *Mrs Browne's Boys* that was running Monday to Friday on 2fm's Gareth O'Callaghan Show. 'What a great exercise,' I thought, 'a twenty-page back story on Mrs Browne.'

So I began. Well nearly. I couldn't decide where to start. I didn't want to go back to her childhood, as that would

require research into the 'times'. So I decided to start on the day she became a widow. I opened the pad and began; I expected the twenty pages to take me an hour or so. Two weeks later I was still writing. The twenty became thirty, forty and on and on. By the time I had finished I had only covered the first nine months of her widowhood. Satisfied, I closed the pad and thought no more about it.

Later on that trip, during a phone call with my then manager Pat Egan, I mentioned the writing. Pat called me three days later and told me that he had spoken to Michael O'Brien, the publisher at The O'Brien Press, and they wanted the 'book'. I protested a little. 'He hasn't even read it yet!' I said, worried that it was crap. Pat replied, 'He doesn't care, if it's about Mrs Browne. He wants it.'

The Mammy was released a few months later and was number one in the bestseller list in its first week. The five-minute radio series led to this book, which led to three more books, which led to me writing a movie - Agnes Browne starring Angelica Huston. After that I wrote five award-winning plays in which I play Mrs Browne. These were followed by seven DVD movies, which between them have sold over a million copies, and now by a BAFTA-nominated TV series, Mrs Brown's Boys, which has broken audience records on both BBC 1 and RTE and which includes in the cast my wife, daughter, son, sister, daughter-in-law, son-in-law and of course ME! Someone asked me the other day, 'How are things?' And I replied truthfully, 'If they get any better, it'll be embarrassing!'

That legal pad cost me a dollar, the pen just 50 cents. That \$1.50 investment has fed, educated, and housed my children and my grandchildren for the last seventeen years. I hope the reading of this book brings you as much joy as the writing of it has brought me. And, for buying it ... my wife thanks you, my family thanks you, and I thank you.

Brendan O'Carroll
Dublin 2011

**Dedicated to my Mother
Maureen O'Carroll TD
Who was my Merlin. Became my mentor. And
is now my Dragonfly.**

Chapter 1

29 MARCH 1967 - DUBLIN

LIKE ALL GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, the interior of the public waiting room in the Department of Social Welfare was drab and uninviting. The walls were painted in three colours: 'Government green,' as it was known to all in Dublin, on the bottom half, and either cream or very old white on the top half, with a one-inch strip of red dividing the two. The only seating consisted of two pew-like wooden benches – these were covered in gouged-out initials and dates. Lighting was provided by one large opaque bowl-like fixture hanging from a six-foot cable in the centre of the high ceiling. The outside of the bowl was dusty, the inside yellowed and speckled with fly shit. In the bottom of the bowl lay a collection of dead flies.

'Serves them right,' said the woman staring at the globe.

'What? Serves who right, Agnes?' her companion asked tenderly.

'Them, Marion.' She pointed to the globe. 'Them flies ... serves them right.'

Marion looked up at the globe. For a couple of minutes they both stared at the light.

'Jaysus, Agnes, I'm not with yeh ... serves them right for what?' Marion was puzzled and not a little concerned about Agnes's state of mind. Grief is a peculiar thing. Agnes pointed at the globe again.

'They flew into that bowl, right? Then they couldn't get out, so they shit themselves and died. Serves them right, doesn't it?'

Marion stared at the globe again, her mouth slightly open, her mind trying to work out what Agnes was on about. Agnes was now back scanning her surroundings; the wall-clock tick-tocked. Again, she looked at the only other person in the room. He was a one-legged man, half-standing, half-propped up at the hatch. She heard him making his claim for unemployment benefit. He was a 'gotchee', a night watchman on a building site. He had just been sacked because some kids had got on to the site and broken the windows. The girl was 'phoning his former employer to ensure he had been sacked and had not left of his own accord. Agnes was trying to imagine what it must be like to be sacked. Being self-employed, she had never been sacked.

'Fuck them.' Marion broke the silence.

'Who?' asked Agnes.

'Them flies,' Marion pointed. 'Fuck them, you're right, shittin' on everything else all their lives. Serves them right! Oh Agnes, is this fella goin' t'be much longer? I'm bustin' for a slash.' Marion had a pained expression on her face. Agnes looked over the man's shoulder. The girl was just putting the phone down.

'She's nearly finished. Look, there's a jacks outside in the hall, you go on, I'll be all right. Go on!'

Marion bolted from the waiting room. At the same time the girl returned to the hatch.

'Right then, Mr O'Reilly. Here's your signing-on card. You will sign on at hatch 44, upstairs in Gardiner Street at 9.30am on Friday, okay?'

The man looked at the card and then back at the girl. 'Friday? But this is Monday. Yer man wouldn't pay me and I've no money.'

The girl became very business-like. 'That's between you and him, Mr O'Reilly. You'll have to sort that out yourself. Friday, 9.30, hatch 44.'

The man still did not leave. 'What will I do between now and Friday?'

The girl had had enough. 'I don't care what you do. You can't stand there until Friday, that's for sure. Now go on, off with you.'

'He's a bollix,' the man told the girl.

She reddened. 'That's enough of that, Mr O'Reilly.'

But he hadn't finished. 'If I had me other leg I'd fuckin' give it to him, I would!'

The girl bowed her head in a resigned fashion. 'If you had your other leg, Mr O'Reilly,' she snapped, 'you would have caught the children and you wouldn't be here now, would you?' She closed the doors of the hatch in the hope that Mr O'Reilly would vanish. He gathered himself together, slid the card into his inside pocket, put his glasses into a clip-lid box and propped his crutch under his arm. As he made for the exit he said aloud, 'And you're a bollix too!' He opened the door of the waiting room just as Marion got to it.

'That one's only a bollix,' he said to her and, surprisingly quickly, headed off down the hallway.

Marion looked after him for a moment and then turned to Agnes. 'What was that about?' she said as she took her seat beside her friend.

Agnes shrugged. 'Don't know. Did yeh go?'

'Yeh.'

'All right then?'

'I'm grand. Jaysus, the paper they use here cuts the arse off'a yeh.'

'That auld greaseproof stuff?'

'Yeh, it's like wipin' your arse with a crisp bag.'

'Yeh.'

'Well, what are you waitin' for?'

'I was waitin' on you to come back. Come on.'

The two women went to the hatch. Agnes pressed the bell. They heard no sound.

'Press it again,' said Marion.

Agnes did. Still no sound. Marion knocked on the hatch doors. Behind, they could hear the sound of movement.

'Someone's comin',' whispered Agnes. Then, as if she was preparing to sing she cleared her throat with a cough. The hatch opened. It was the same girl. She didn't look up. Instead she opened a notebook and, still with the head down, asked, 'Name and social welfare number?'

'I don't have one,' Agnes replied.

'You don't have a name?' The girl now looked up.

'Of course she has a name,' Marion now joined in. 'It's Agnes, after the Blessed Agnes, Agnes Browne.'

'I haven't got a social welfare number.'

'Everybody has a social welfare number, Missus!'

'Well, I haven't!'

'Your husband - is he working?'

'No, not any more.'

'So, he's signed on, then?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'He's dead.'

The girl was now silent. She stared at Agnes, then at Marion.

'Dead?' Both women nodded. The girl was still not giving up on the numbers game. 'Do you have your widow's pension book with you?'

'I haven't got one, that's why I'm here.'

'Ah, so this is a new claim?' The girl felt better now that she had a grasp of what was happening. She lifted a form from below the counter. Both women shot glances at each other, a look of fear crossing their faces. They regarded the answering of questions on forms as an exam of some kind. Agnes wasn't prepared for this. The girl began the interrogation.

'Now, your full name?'

'Agnes Loretta Browne.'

'Is that Browne with an "E"?'

'Yeh, and Agnes with an "E" and Loretta with an "E".'

The girl stared at Agnes, not sure that this woman wasn't taking the piss out of her.

'Your maiden name?'

'Eh, Reddin.'

'Lovely. Now, your husband's name?'

'Nicholas Browne, and before you ask, I don't know his maiden name.'

'Nicholas Browne will be fine. Occupation?'

Agnes looked at Marion and back at the girl, then said softly, 'Dead.'

'No, when he was alive, what did he do when he was alive?'

'He was a kitchen porter.'

'And where did he work?'

Again, Agnes looked into Marion's blank face. 'In the kitchen?' she offered, hoping it was the right answer.

'Of course in the kitchen, but which kitchen? Was it a hotel?'

'It's still a hotel, isn't it, Marion?' Marion nodded.

'Which hotel?!' The girl was exasperated now and the question came out through her teeth.

'The Gresham Hotel in O'Connell Street, love,' Agnes answered confidently. That was an easy one. The girl scribbled in the answer and moved down the form.

'Now, what was the cause of death?'

'A hunter,' Agnes said.

'Was he shot?' the girl asked incredulously. 'Was your husband shot?'

'By who?' Agnes asked this question as if the girl had found out something about her husband's death that she didn't know herself.

'The hunter, was your husband shot by a hunter?'

Agnes was puzzled now. She thought it out for a moment and then a look of realisation spread over her face.

‘No, love! A Hillman Hunter, he was knocked down by a Hillman Hunter – a car!’

The girl stared at the two women again, then dismissed the thought that this was Candid Camera. These are just two gobshites, she told herself. ‘A motor accident ... I see.’ She scribbled again. The two women could see that she was now writing on the bottom line. They were pleased. But then she turned the form over to a new list of questions. The disappointment of the women was audible. The young girl felt it and in an effort to ease the tension of the two said, ‘That must have been a shock.’

Agnes thought for a moment. ‘Yeh, it must have been, sure he couldn’t have been expecting it!’

The girl glanced around the room, wondering could it be possible that there was a hidden camera after all. Again she dismissed it.

‘Right, then, let’s move on. Now, how many children do you have?’

‘Seven.’

‘Seven? A good Catholic family!’

‘Ah, they’re all right. But yeh have to bate the older wans to Mass.’

‘I’m sure. Eh, I’ll need their names and ages.’

‘Right! Let me see, Mark is the eldest, he’s fourteen; then Francis, he’s thirteen; then the twins, there’s two of them, Simon and Dermot, twelve, both of them; then Rory and he’s eleven; after him there’s Cathy, she was a forceps, very difficult!’

‘It was, I remember it well. You’re a martyr, Agnes,’ Marion commented.

‘Ah sure, what can you do, Marion. She’s ten; and last of all there’s Trevor, the baby, he’s three.’

The form had been designed to accommodate ten children so there was plenty of space left. The girl ran a line through the last three spaces and moved on to the next

section. In the back of her mind she wondered what it was between 1957 and 1964 that gave Mrs Browne the 'break'!

'Now, when did your husband die?'

'At half-four.'

'Yes, but what day?'

'This mornin'.'

'This morning! But sure, he couldn't even have a death certificate yet!'

'Ah no, not at all - sure he didn't even go past primary!'

'No, a death certificate. I need a death certificate. A certificate from the doctor stating that your husband is in fact dead. He could be alive, for all I know.'

'No, love, he's definitely dead. Definitely. Isn't he, Marion?'

Marion agreed. 'Absolutely. I know him years, and I've never seen him look so bad. Dead, definitely dead!'

'Look Mrs ... eh, Browne, I cannot process this until you get a death certificate from the hospital or doctor that pronounced your husband dead.'

Mrs Browne's eyes half-closed as she thought about this. 'So, if I can't get this until tomorrow, I'll lose a day's money?'

'You won't lose anything, Mrs Browne. It will be back-dated. You will get every penny that's due to you. I promise.'

Marion was relieved for her friend. She poked her in the side. 'Back-dated, that's grand, Agnes, so you needn't have rushed down at all.'

Agnes wasn't convinced. 'Are you sure?'

The girl smiled. 'I'm absolutely sure. Now look, take this form with you - it's all filled in already - and when you get the death certificate, hand them both in together. Oh, and bring your marriage certificate as well, you'll get that from the church that you married in. In the meantime, Mrs Browne, if you need some money to get by on just call down

to the Dublin Health Authority Office in Jervis Street and see the relieving officer there.'

Agnes took all this in. 'The relieving officer, Jervis Street?'

The girl nodded. 'Jervis Street.'

Agnes folded the form. She was about to leave but she turned back to the girl. 'Don't mind that one-legged "gotchee". You're very good, love, and you're not a bollix!'

With that, the two women stepped back out into the March sunshine to prepare for a funeral.