

MARY MORRISSY

THE

RISING

OF

BELLA

CASEY

'Compelling and beautiful.'
Joseph O'Connor

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‘... elegant and unadorned at the same time ... an intimate portrait of a woman and a profoundly necessary depiction of Irish history at its most extreme ... a wonderful book from one of our finest writers.’

Colum McCann

‘*The Rising of Bella Casey* is a novel that is compelling and beautiful, no mere tale of historical restoration but a story full of strange resonances for our own time.’

Joseph O’Connor

‘Mary Morrissy has a genius for lifting characters out of the dim backgrounds of history and brilliantly illuminating them. In *The Rising of Bella Casey* she evokes the rich Dublin world of the plays of Seán O’Casey, and creates a moving drama that O’Casey himself would have acknowledged.’

John Banville

‘One of the most intelligent, well-written and well-researched historical novels I have read. Mary Morrissy is the Irish Hilary Mantel.’

Eilís Ní Dhuibhne

‘As is Morrissy’s trademark, she offers us not just a glimpse of a person, but full, vivid lives set against a richly imagined time and place in history.’

Julianna Baggott

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BRANDON

For Ruth Morrissy, as promised a long time ago

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The spark that ignited my interest in Bella Casey came from Colbert Kearney's study of the oral tradition in O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, *The Glamour of Grammar*. I drew on Seán O'Casey's six volumes of autobiographies for inspiration in creating Bella's world. I read a great deal of background material while writing the novel, too voluminous to mention here. Three books deserve special mention, however – *Kildare Place: the History of the Church of Ireland Training College and College of Education, 1811-2012*, by Susan M Parkes, *London's Women Teachers: Gender, Class and Feminism 1870-1930*, by Dina Copelman, and *Dublin Tenement Life, An Oral History*, by Kevin C Kearns. There is a wealth of

biographical scholarship on Seán O'Casey, but Christopher Murray's *Seán O'Casey: Writer at Work* provided a broad overview of his life and work, while Martin B Marguiles's *The Early Life of Seán O'Casey* offered an intimate and witty examination of the playwright's youth.

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EASTER MONDAY, 1916

‘**A**skirmish,’ Bella Beaver declared with more certitude than she felt. ‘That’s all it is.’

‘*They* said it was a rising,’ her daughter, Babsie, shot back. ‘Isn’t that what they called it, Starry?’

Babsie had been stepping out with Starry Murphy for a couple of months. His given name was Patrick but a doting aunt had likened him to a celestial gift, being the only boy in a clutch of girls, and the name had stuck. He was one of *them*, a Catholic, an RC, but though she disapproved, Mrs Beaver had held her tongue.

‘That’s exactly so,’ Starry said.

A dapper boy, he reminded Mrs Beaver of her dead husband. Something about his dark tossed hair, his jaunty manner. Her Nick as a young man, that is. Before he’d been tainted, before she’d been destroyed ... but no, she would not dwell on sorry history for it was a wound to her.

Starry had been on duty at Jacobs for the holiday weekend to keep the ovens ticking over and Babsie had gone to meet him when he came off shift. ‘He was on the fitter’s floor,’ Babsie began for she was in the habit of speaking for Starry even when he was present, ‘when he and the other lads heard this ragged bunch galloping up the stairs, taking them two at a time, all business. They marched right into the “King’s Own” room without a how do you do, full of bluff and declaration and, I swear to God, waving guns they were. Isn’t that so, Starry?’

Starry nodded.

When Mr Bonar, the overseer, approached the belligerent band to sort the matter out, he was pushed roughly aside.

In the name of the Irish Republic ... one of them announced unscrolling a parchment and reading from it.

‘The Irish Republic, whatever that is when it’s at home,’ Babsie said. ‘Starry thought it all some kind of a caper or a crowd of travelling players putting on a free theatrical. Then the tricked-up soldiers rounded everyone up, bar Mr Bonar and the watchman, and herded them out on to the street saying there’d be no more baking biscuits in Jacobs this fine day.’

A crowd had gathered. Women mostly, howling like Revolution furies at the pretend soldiers.

‘Youse boyos should go off to France and fight, instead of turning guns on your own,’ one of them hollered waving her fist as a couple of them appeared on the roof of Jacobs and ran up a strange flag of green, white and gold. And then a shot rang out.

‘And that decided us,’ Babsie said, speaking again for Starry.

On their way home they passed the General Post Office. All shuttered up and sandbags built up at the entrance, and the self-same declaration pasted on the doors with stamps.

‘The Post Office no longer belongs to us,’ Babsie reported. ‘It’s the headquarters of the New Ireland.’

‘The New Ireland,’ Mrs Beaver repeated wonderingly. Then she retreated to her original position. ‘It’s a skirmish, that’s all.’

They lived through the rest of the day and the day following by report alone – or the hiss of rumour, though it was a principle of Mrs Beaver’s to discourage idle gossip. The Germans were coming, Mrs Clarke said, whole battalions of them to prop up the rebels. The length and breadth of Sackville Street was destroyed. And further afield, too, according to Sadie Kinch, second next door. Chancellor’s, the opticians, gone, she said, Court Photographers a pile of

smoking rubble and Pickford's all but demolished, its windows all blown in.

'And the looting!' said Sadie. 'My husband saw it for himself. Doxies parading about in fur coats from Marnane's and ropes of pearls filched from Hopkins and Hopkins.'

'Sure that's nothing,' Mrs Clarke piped up, 'I heard there was a crowd of scavengers in Manfield's windows, brawling in full sight. And sure everyone knows they only display the left shoes.'

'And hats,' Sadie Kinch countered, 'there were blackguards going round with three and four piled up on their heads, as trophies for their wives.'

As she listened to her neighbours, Mrs Beaver wondered how they were so knowledgeable about such lawless behaviour. She would keep a sharp eye out in case said Sadie Kinch might sport some new and unexpected millinery in the near future.

When she awoke on Wednesday morning, the rumours flying up and down the lane had been replaced by a solemn Sabbath calm. Mrs Beaver wondered if the tall tales were something she'd dreamt up, a feverish kind of fantasy like one of those moving pictures at the Royal. After two days behind closed doors, there wasn't a morsel left in the house and they were reduced to tea grounds used twice over and drunk black. She would have to venture out. Valentine offered to escort her.

'You'd never know, Mam, it might be dangerous out there.'

She took her son up on the offer although she did not credit the talk of cannon roar and devastation and fully expected to find everything as it had been. She would go as far as the Pioneer Stores for a loaf of bread and a twist of tea. But when she and Valentine arrived at the shop, they found the shutters padlocked and the double-doors bolted

giving the place a bereaved air as if someone had died within.

Having made it this far with not a hint of trouble, she suggested to Valentine that they might light out towards town in the hope of finding some other establishment open. They could do with kindling and paraffin for the lamp, else they'd be sunk in darkness for the rest of the week. They saw nothing untoward, bar every other huckster's shop showing closed doors, until they got as far as Amiens Street. Deserted, not a single omnibus running and the train station silent as the grave. They halted at the mouth of Talbot Street. There was a strange smell in the air, singed and sulphurous, as if a fire had been guttered out. As they stood there, a man accosted them, putting his hand up like a constable.

'Take your mother home direct, Sonny,' he said to Valentine, 'for youse are in mortal danger here.'

He was a portly fellow with pot belly and ruddy cheeks.

'But we're in search of bread,' Mrs Beaver told him.

'Bread, is it? There's no bread getting gave around here, Missus. The place is in a state of chassis and youse should not be out.'

But the eerie quiet gave a lie to his pronouncements. And he was out, was he not, if only to be a prophet of doom?

'There's a gunboat pounding the bejasus out of the Custom House, not to speak of snipers on every rooftop.' He pointed in the general direction of heaven. 'Better to be home with your belly growling than be shot down on the street like a dog.'

Men like him, Mrs Beaver thought, can get all puffed up with calamity. He knew no more than they did, going only on the overheated gossip of the last ignorant person he had come across. And he was enjoying himself too much, issuing his florid warnings.

'I'm not for turning,' Mrs Beaver told him sharpish.

‘Please yourself, Missus,’ he said. ‘But I advise youse not to be walking out so brazenly. Youse should creep along and hug the walls for there are gunmen everywhere.’

Valentine drew her aside.

‘Maybe yer man’s right, Mam,’ he said, ‘maybe we should go home.’

‘We’ll go as far as Gardiner Street,’ she said, reckless with authority.

By right, it should have been her son itching to see some action and she, his mother, staying his hand. Instead, Mrs Beaver sounded, even to her own ears, like a bargaining child, come too late to the bazaar but trying to wring the last iota of enjoyment as the stalls are being packed away.

‘Youse’ll be turned back,’ the nay-sayer said. ‘Or worse.’

They hurried down Talbot Street, no longer strolling as they had been, and turned on to Gardiner Street. On any other day of the week street walkers would have been abroad here, congregating on the footsteps and brazenly showing off their wares, the windows of the lower floors thrown open so the passer-by could see their squalid boudoirs on display. But it, too, was eerily unpeopled, except that lying in the middle of the street, where the people should have been, was a horse. A black carcass, a bloodied hole in its haunch, glittery with flies. Its dead eye seemed to observe them. Valentine hung back and Mrs Beaver took the lead.

‘We’ll go as far as Abbey Street,’ she said sensing that each stage of this journey would have to be negotiated for Valentine was waxing nervous. They made it almost as far as Butt Bridge before they were stopped. A couple of soldiers were lodged there behind a barricade of sandbags laced with wire.

‘Move back,’ one of them yelled, waving his rifle at them. ‘Move back, I tell you. There’s nothing to see here.’

But he was wrong. All along Abbey Street, the once erect buildings and fancy shops were full of gaping wounds. The

floors above the shops had sagged in places, the masonry like the roughed-up lace on the tail of a petticoat. When she looked up, fine parlour rooms on the upper storeys were exposed where the glass had all been shattered. Curtains billowed raggedly. The houses left standing were reduced to nervous wrecks as if they had suffered from the jitters of war. Mrs Beaver had heard reports of war from afar – her eldest, James, was in colours and the newspapers were full of dispatches from Verdun – but nothing prepared her for the ruinous complexion of it on the streets of Dublin. She had never been a gawper by nature but there was something about this wreck-age that mesmerised her. Despite all the evidence of ruin, there was barely a sound. This must be what the Great Silence is like, she thought, this dreadful peace. While she was thinking this, a vast boom emanated from Sackville Street making the very ground under their feet shiver. It was answered by the puny rat-a-tat-tat of gunfire. For the first time, Mrs Beaver was afraid.

‘Come on, Mam,’ Valentine said and grasped her hand.

They clung to the hems of the buildings, ducking from one doorway to the next, their journey punctuated by sporadic firing, which though not close, made them dive for any shelter they could find. In one such respite, they shared their billet with a young man in a dusty grey suit and muffler. A second boom rang out.

‘Dear God,’ the young man muttered, ‘they’re trying to blow our lads to kingdom come.’

From the way he said ‘our lads’, Mrs Beaver knew he was one of *them*, the insurrectionists.

‘If I were you, young fella,’ he said to Valentine, though the two boys were of an age, ‘I’d take my mammy off home. This is no place for ladies nor civilians.’

He blessed himself then and darted out of the doorway. As he did, Mrs Beaver noticed the dull glare of gunmetal beneath the flap of his coat. All went deathly quiet again

and she and Valentine were about to venture forth when a single shot rang out. The young man halted and staggered forward. He seemed to rise, levitate almost, his arms aloft in supplication before he folded decorously and fell. Even his cap stayed in place. He lay quite still, his eyes closed as if he were in slumber.

That could be my James, lying there, Mrs Beaver thought, but her son was out beyond in a foreign field, fighting for his country - where this boy should be, by all rights, instead of joining himself to this villainous mayhem. But her righteousness only lasted a moment. In the lightning flash of the gunfire, she saw another one of her errors. How could she have let James go, when she should have lain down before him to stop him, to spare him *this*? The young man twitched and groaned, his fingers groping blindly.

‘We should do something for him,’ she said to Valentine.

‘And get our heads blown off?’

‘Still and all,’ Mrs Beaver said thinking again of James.

‘Still and all nothing, Mam.’

And while they were debating thus, the young man died, Mrs Beaver was sure, his life quenched out before their very eyes.

If she had been in thrall before, she was paralysed now. She had always imagined battle as a continuous and logical barrage, organised and stately. But no, it came in waves like the sea rushing to the shore, but unlike the tide, it was impossible to predict. The next report of rifle might be for her, or worse, her poor son whom she’d dragged into the middle of this danger instead of shielding him from it. So rooted to the spot had she become, that Valentine had to prod her to get her moving again. They crouched and began to make their painful way like crabs scuttling in the dirt, their eyes fixed at street-level. The thunder of field-gun and patter of rifle-fire continued at their backs. On Mecklenburgh Street they squatted in the porch of an ale

house and Mrs Beaver, thankful of the glassy calm, closed her eyes. But Valentine would not let her rest.

‘Come on, Mam, come on, would you?’

Reluctantly she opened her eyes and knew immediately something had changed. She blinked twice not sure if she had conjured up what she saw. A piano. Had it been there all along? Or had God rolled it on to the stage while her attention had been distracted? It stood in the gutter at the other side of the street, canted to one side. Against instruction, Mrs Beaver straightened.

‘Stay low, Mam, stay low,’ Valentine hollered at her.

But something reared up in Mrs Beaver. She had been low long enough.

It was a Broadwood, an upright Broadwood, intact in all this ruin, offering itself to her. Indian rosewood case, inlaid panels and candle sconces, the lid open to show a perfect set of teeth, a music holder with a scrolled inset in the shape of a treble clef. She laid her hand gingerly on it. The wood was silky to her fingertips and she felt a rush of the sublime.

‘Mam!’ Valentine shrieked.

She knew that she should follow him but she couldn’t move. She wanted this so badly it made her throat ache. Valentine sprinted back and tugged her by the elbow.

‘Come away out of that,’ he said. ‘Leave it be. It’s looters’ leavings. Some gurrer will be back for it, you can be sure, and we’ve had enough strife for one day.’

But she could no more have left it than she could have abandoned a child.

‘Here,’ she said, looking hurriedly around her, ‘you catch it by the other end.’

‘What?’

‘We cannot leave it here like this. It’ll only get destroyed.’

He looked at her aghast.

‘Are you mad, or what, Mam?’

She was mad, maddened with desire, or greed. She was not even sure of the difference. Who knew what had taken hold of her, a respectable fifty-year-old widow eyeing up a piano in the middle of a battlefield and wanting it for herself.

'Are you going to let your mother struggle with this alone?' she demanded.

Her voice came out shrill and panicky to her own ears. But it galvanised her son. He put his shoulder to the piano and none too gently began to push. The strings let out a timorous screech. With Valentine at one end and her at the other, they loosed the piano from the rut which had obviously defeated their thieving predecessors and with enormous effort, they levered it on to the kerb and got it rolling on its brass casters. Valentine set his shoulder against it and began to push. Mrs Beaver pulled from the front as if leading a reluctant beast. Every so often she would halt their progress. The strings would issue a celestial sigh of relief. She would lift the lid and check the shivering keys. Then she would throw her shawl over the top. It looked pathetic as if she thought this would disguise what they were at.

'Ah Mam, give over with the inspections or you'll get us killed,' Valentine shouted at her. 'Or bloody banged up in a polis cell.'

His mother let the oath pass, a sure sign she was not in her right mind. She was forever chastising him for rough language. Twice he was sure he heard a policeman's whistle but it was only the casters shrieking for want of oil.

'We are like Sisyphus with his burden,' his mother said between gasps of exertion. Valentine Beaver loved his mother, but sometimes he wondered if she was a bit soft in the head. As they heaved and pushed, he kept a scouring eye out on every side-street they passed for signs of the law. As if reading his mind his mother said: 'If we are challenged, we will say that I am the Principal Teacher at

the Model School in Marlborough Street and this here's the school piano that we are trying to save from the ravages of war.'

The notions! As if anyone would mistake his tenement-thin mother for a professional lady. One look at her dour, serviceable skirts, her speckled grey hair all awry and escaping from the grasp of a gap-toothed comb, her front tooth cracked where his father had given her a belt once, would give the game away. They rumbled their prize on. As they progressed, they had to halt several times for his mother was quite out of puff and it is heavy labour shunting a piano. The casters were wayward and apt to follow their own direction. No more than his mother. Each time they stopped, sweat pouring from his brow, he would beg, 'Let's leave it here, Mam, and be done with it.'

But her only reply was to lean into the haunch of the damn piano as if she were involved in birth labour.

They were not stopped, not by anyone in a uniform that is, though they got some queer looks from the few citizens they passed. As they travelled his mother seemed to grow bold, a haughty jib to her jaw, so by the time they'd made it to the Five Lamps, he swore she would have cowed any challenger with a mere look. He was never so glad to reach Brady's Lane with all the doors thankfully shut for they would have faced the third degree had the neighbours been about.

'Mam has entirely lost her wits,' he declared as they struggled to push the Broadwood over the threshold. 'She made me lug this yoke all the way from Mecklenburgh Street!'

'Where's the bread?' Babsie enquired, arms folded in indignant fashion across her chest.

'I'm hungry,' Baby John wailed.

But Mrs Beaver ignored both lamentation and rebuff.

Once inside she examined the piano for signs of damage. It was a wretched and undignified way to treat a precious

musical instrument, akin to violent assault, but it seemed to have escaped unscathed. She beckoned to Babsie and John to help her put the piano in place under the four-squared window that squinted on to the street. She stood back to admire it. Her very own piano, the sum of every fine and noble aspiration she had ever nurtured. She pulled up a kitchen chair and dredged up from memory Mozart's *Rondo Alla Turca*. Her ruined fingers knew their way about though her swollen joints were rusty. She stumbled through to the end, her children clustered around her as if at a recital, but they were surly with puzzlement. This gaiety of their mother's was a mood they did not know. When she had finished she eyed them fiercely, an expression they were more familiar with.

'If anybody asks,' she warned, 'not that it's anybody's business, you can tell them this is your mother's inheritance, do you hear?'

'A likely story, Bella,' her brother said coming upon the scene, for in her haste to get the piano safely housed, Mrs Beaver had left the street door open.

Babsie stepped away from the piano. There'd be fireworks now, the girl thought. Her Uncle Jack and her mother were always at loggerheads. Like chalk and cheese, that pair. Her mother, proud, Protestant and loyal to the Crown, her uncle a Labour man, a nationalist, a spouter of Irish, even. And Godless with it, her mother would say. Babsie was surprised to see him for she was sure he would have been mixed up in the rising. Skirmish, she corrected herself.

Her uncle was forever talking revolution, the workers throwing off their chains. She knew for a fact he'd been off drilling with the Citizen Army.

'Are you not out with them?' she asked him.

'Ah no, Babsie ... this whole business,' - he jerked his head towards the street - 'it's a bloody folly.'

Her mother's hands had fallen to her lap. Like Babsie, she was waiting for the lofty condemnation that was sure to come. No matter what he thought of the rising, he would not approve of looting. He stood on the threshold of the cold room – no fire lit, no food on the table,

'Don't mind me,' he said, 'play on.'

Her mother went back to the keys, reprising the Turkish tune. When she was done, Uncle Jack clapped his hands and let out a whoop of admiration. Then he began to laugh while Babsie and Valentine exchanging perplexed looks.

'What's the joke?' Baby John asked.

'Bella fiddles while Dublin burns,' Uncle Jack said finally, still spluttering with laughter. Her mother made no response to the mirth at her expense.

'Paradise regained, Bella, by hook or by crook!' Jack tried again.

'By crook,' Valentine said, scowling.

But even then her mother refused to be riled. She returned to her playing. A different tune this time, more sombre, a dead march tempo. Babsie flounced into the scullery to put the kettle on. It would have to be third-hand tea now from the last pot they'd brewed. Really, her mother was the giddy limit. Send her out for tea and she comes back with a blessed piano. And then she sits down and gives a recital!

'The *Moonlight Sonata*,' her mother announced.

Valentine knelt before the hearth and tried to rouse a spark from the ashes. Baby John's stomach grumbled. Mrs Beaver shut them out. Hang them all! Even her brother, once so beloved, trying to bait her on the doorstep. She concentrated on the creeping left hand, like the steady arpeggio of time. Once, she would have favoured the yearning right. She closed her eyes and let her creaking fingers lead her blindly back, back to the beginning of their story.

ELYSIAN



MISTRESS OF HER CIRCUMSTANCES

Her mother, big as a house, was at the washboard in the scullery when her waters broke. She let out a piercing shriek. Bella Casey, two floors up, at the piano in the drawing room, paused, her hands frozen above the keys. It was a Chapell upright with turned columns and panels of fretted silk in the top door, with the name Elysian carved in gold above middle C. At fifteen, Bella was squeamish in matters biological and irked at being kept from school. Especially since Aunt Izzie had agreed to be on hand; she had been a nurse tender and knew a thing or two about bringing babies home. But Bella's mother was nervous of this birth; she had lost the two babies before to the croup. Bella, truculent, had spent the day trying to master the *Moonlight Sonata*. When she heard her mother first cry out, she sat for a few moments praying that this chalice might pass.

'Bella!'

There was no mistaking the summons a second time. Bella rose and made her way downstairs, full of dread. Her mother stood by the Belfast sink, hands doused in blue, clutching her belly and moaning like an Arab at prayer.

'Get your Auntie Izzie,' she commanded through gritted teeth.

Aunt Izzie was somewhere in the upper reaches of the house.

'Go,' she said again as Bella stared at her mother and realised how very small she appeared and how very large the creature inside her must be and it drumming to come out. She had shot up that winter and found herself being able to look down on her own mother - a queer sensation.

‘What ails you, girl?’ Mother all but roared. ‘Go, would you?’

Soon her mother would be felled like a tree, petticoats up about her and her privates all on show. There wouldn’t even be time to lead her to the bed where Izzie had laid newspaper to spare the linen. Bella wanted to flee. Luckily Aunt Izzie bustled in at that moment and took charge.

‘Water, Bella, if you please,’ she barked, ‘and plenty of it’.

‘That girl is useless,’ Bella heard her mother say as they set to about their sordid struggle. Mother yelling and Aunt Izzie shouting until their voices bled into one and then slowly, inch by bloodied inch – the head emerged, not like a child at all but like some... some *thing*, angry and inflamed, with Mother at one end clenching around her prize and Aunt Izzie at the other ignominious end trying to take it from her. And it was as if Mother wouldn’t let go and so the pair of them tussled like a pair of dogs over offal until Aunt Izzie won and Bella’s brother Jack was delivered on the floor of the scullery. Bella, blood-stained, sud-smeared witness, felt she had birthed the child herself.

He was born with a caul. It was like a veil that covered his eyes. Straight after the birth, Aunt Izzie placed a sheet of paper over the baby’s head and peeled the caul away with her fingertips. The next day, rising prematurely from her childbed, Bella’s mother dispatched Izzie off with instructions to go down to the Seaman’s Mission on the Quays and sell it off. Bella’s father had already refused though he was in the way of going there whenever a big ship was in port to do his proselytising. His title at the Church Mission on Townsend Street was clerk but he was much more than a keeper of accounts. He taught Bible study on Sundays to working men and in the evenings he would often tramp around the docks with pamphlets culled from the tracts of the Reverend Dallas. The one who had

‘A girl,’ her mother had said, ‘should give up a lot for love.’ That was her final word.

AFTERWORD

Seán O'Casey (1880–1964) is one of Ireland's premier playwrights. He also wrote six volumes of autobiography, in which his only sister, Bella, featured. For reasons that have never been clear, O'Casey prematurely killed Bella off in his autobiographies – about ten years before her time. She actually died at the start of the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918.

The Rising of Bella Casey is a fictional reinterpretation of her life.

About the Author



Mary Morrissy is the author of two novels, *Mother of Pearl* and *The Pretender*, and a collection of short stories, *A Lazy Eye*. She is a winner of the prestigious US Lannan Prize and the Hennessy Award for short fiction. Her short stories have been widely published and anthologised in the UK and the US.

She teaches on the MA programme in Creative Writing at University College Cork and divides her time between Dublin and Cork.