

Cleveland Plain Dealer Jan. 15, 1989

The High Road
By Edna O'Brien
Farrar Straus Giroux

A.L. Barker once observed, "Inside each of Edna O'Brien's stories is a full-length novel." Inside *The High Road*, Ms. O'Brien's first novel in over a decade, lurk a dozen stories, all told by the love-wounded protagonist Anna.

Anna has left her home in England "a mendicant from love, from disappointment," hoping to heal in a Spanish village from her just-ended love affair with "the man that I believed had broken my heart, but in my saner moments I recognized as being probably the last to partake with me at that fount of sensuality, and vertigo and earthly love."

Stripped of love at the near-edge of old age, Anna finds herself among many women, and one man, whose youth is gone and have little love to show for the spent years. Only the young Spanish girl Catalina, as freshly bloomed as the flowers she seems to always carry, offers the chance to rekindle the embers of life left to Anna. But Anna inevitably learns, as have most O'Brien heroines before her, that when a woman bares her heart pain will find it quickly.

Edna O'Brien writes with the nerve of a tightrope walker, constantly risking absurdity and the fall into sentimentality that would await a lesser author who approached her material. Her heroines are obsessively heartbroken, pained almost as if by choice, shrunken, nearly beaten. But O'Brien soars above sentimentality for two reasons, closely related.

For one, Anna, at least until the book's terrifying end, stays undefeated because she goes on trying. Despite loss of lover, loss even of the custody of her children, she continually seeks intimacy, meaningful contact with the people in her small world. She experiences frequent moments of anguish but almost none of self-pity, too absorbed in searching for the human core of others to become lost in the gored parts of her own.

More impressive, Anna remains vibrantly alive to the bittersweet beauty of her world, seeing it not as a mirror of pain but a canvas pregnant with life. As Mary Gordon once noted of O'Brien, "She is never sentimental because she is never vague. Sentimentality is largely a failure of eyesight."

Edna O'Brien's eyes spatter a brilliance on the natural world around her which she relates in prose so lovely it glistens about its subject like dew about a dahlia. Whether cast upward at a moon "that shamed itself by being there. The light was shockingly, searingly bright, so bright that the cones in the undersides of the cypress trees stood out like very white knuckles, clear enough to be counted or to be smacked, one by one," or downward--"I climbed to the top of the town and had my first glimpse of the sea, a patch of blue between two rocks. It was of such blueness that it seemed not to be water but a potion, of magical properties, as if a flock of peacocks had been liquidized and metamorphosed to create this flagrant, saturating blueness. Between the town and the sea were the orchards--trees and foliage giving a softness to the landscape, a sigh, taking the sizzle out of the air, creating a silvery stir as the

olive leaves decided to shift upward, then droop again like the wings of a butterfly, lazing"--Anna clothes her world in dazzling hues and microscopic detail.

Such eyes will seldom be sentimental. Instead, in this touching novel they remind us what the pain of lost love actually is: irrefutable proof that we are alive.