

Blue Road: The Edna O'Brien Story [12A]

2024

Ireland

99 mins

UK released **18 April 2025**

Director **Sinéad O'Shea**

Screenplay **Sinéad O'Shea**

Cinematography **Richard Kendrick**

Music **John McCallion**

Cast **Jessie Buckley** (Edna); **Declan Conlon** (Ernest); As themselves: **Edna O'Brien, Carlo Gébler, Gabriel Byrne, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Anne Enright**

“This thing of falling in love,” Edna O'Brien says in *Blue Road*, “it’s such a nuisance.” The acclaimed Irish writer, who passed away in July 2024 at age 93, had a gift for words, but little luck in love. The writer shares her story with extraordinary vulnerability with director Sinéad O'Shea (*Pray for Our Sinners*); it’s distressingly illustrative of the misogyny she faced for the intimacy and candour of her depictions of women’s sexuality. O'Shea does O'Brien's story well, offering a fully formed character study that, like the writer's works, tackles the social issues of Ireland's oppressive Catholic bent.

Oscar-nominated actor Jessie Buckley (*Women Talking*) doubles as O'Brien's voice to read her memoirs. Having two Ednas—one young and one old—illustrates the reach of a voice that's touched readers across generations and irked others who likely didn't turn a page of any of her books. The film tells how O'Brien grew up as an observant girl in Tuamgraney, County Clare and quickly proved a handful. She fell in love with a much older man, writer Ernest Gebler, and married him to her mother's protests. The age gap brought a hint of scandal and notoriety that O'Brien would have to learn to live with throughout her life.

Gebler had an outdated view of working women. When she published her landmark book *The Country Girls* in 1960, a troubled marriage became a truly tempestuous one as Gebler proved envious of his wife's success.

Glimpses at O'Brien's diary illustrate Gebler's escalating pattern of pathetic jealousy. Notes in red offer his ripostes to O'Brien's own diary entries.

O’Brien had a lifelong struggle with men, too, as O’Shea chronicles the controversies that the author faced book after book. O’Brien and various talking heads tell how one title after another was banned in Ireland and decried as smut for what were then taboo expressions of women’s desire. Yet for all the brouhaha about these depictions of women as sexual beings—controversy that erupted to the point that commentators wished death upon the author—Gebler had the audacity to claim O’Brien’s books as his own. Even after Edna leaves her marriage, she tells a tale of struggles and delayed success. In the 1970s, the popularity of her books and the success of some Hollywood adaptations—one film even won the Golden Globe—brought her some money. However, O’Brien admits that money simply slipped through her fingers as she relished a new notoriety for throwing wild parties. Attracting suitors like Marlon Brando and Robert Mitchum, while striking up friendships with the likes of Jackie O, O’Brien recounts a unique position within popular culture: a celebrity who worked at a college by day and partied with the biggest names on the planet by night, all while staying true to a voice that took social issues to task. By the end though, O’Brien lives long enough to enjoy recognition of her work and reappraisal of her impact. She takes pride in saying that she had enough money to buy a plot for herself. It’s not a Hollywood ending, but one that’s truly fitting of a work that bears Edna O’Brien’s name.

Pat Mullen, *POV*, 8 September 2024 (abridged)

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