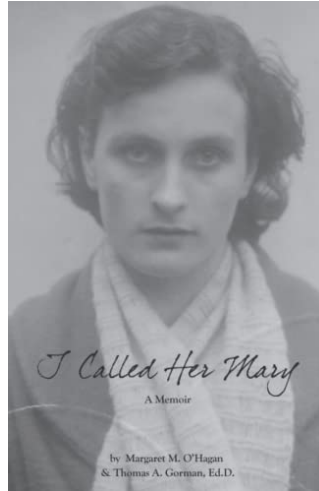


I Called Her Mary

By Margaret M. O'Hagan & Thomas Gorman
Reviewed by Hank Bitten, NJCSS Executive Director

"I love studying history because it's nice reading about people who overcame a lifetime of difficulties against all odds."



"Every Sunday, we walked together about five miles to church. We didn't have a car, so we walked over an hour to arrive at Mass on time. We had the choice of going to 7:00 A.M. Mass at the monastery or walk in the opposite direction for 9:00 A.M. Mass at church in Shinrone. On rainy days, we ran while the rain soaked through our clothes. To this day, I never remember seeing an umbrella in Ireland." (p. 29)



The Roman Catholic Church in Shinrone, built in 1860

The hidden stories of ordinary people are an essential part of the historical narrative. Unfortunately, these stories remain hidden. Everyone reading this book review has an important story – one related to triumph, tragedy, perseverance, culture, faith, and philosophy. The story of Peg Holland began on April 12, 1937. It was the age of the Zeppelins and there was a good chance that the giant German airship with 97 passengers passed over the farm house of the Hollands on its fateful voyage to Lakehurst, New Jersey in May of 1937. Peg will grow up during World War II and her life as a young adult at the age of 13 will begin in the middle of the 20th century. This is significant as immigrants from West Germany and Ireland came to America in the hope of a better life. The United States of America was a place of hope, liberty, and freedom from the traditions of Europe.

The story of Peg Holland is anything but ordinary as it reveals insights into Irish and American culture. Her story is powerful and very different from *Life with Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*. The story of history is the story of people. Through her experiences we learn about Elvis, Irish clubs, dating, conflicts, and hopes. The stories of ordinary people are valuable because they provide insights that are deeper than nostalgia. They reveal why liberty, equality, homeownership, education, and family are important and at times appear to be the 'impossible' dream. In this context we see how an immigrant woman comes to understand the purpose of the American Revolution for her. This is a story that prompts inquiry and discussion by students in a Sociology or history class, book club, or religious study group.

The design of this book is carefully planned for discussion and reflection as each chapter is less than ten pages taking less than 15 minutes to read. Each chapter includes a unique episode similar to binge watching a streaming movie. In fact, one might look at this book in terms of five seasons:

- Season 1 (life in rural Ireland)
- Season 2 (adoption of Mary and moving to New York)
- Season 3 (married life)
- Season 4 (unexpected situations)
- Season 5 (reunion and optimism)

This memoir is an inspiring account of the discrimination of an unwed teenage mother experienced by the women in her community, a decision for adoption of her nine-month old daughter, working as a nanny, finding love in the Bronx, moving to the suburbs of New Jersey, the extended Irish family, and her reunion with her daughter 50 years later.

This historical narrative takes place over 70 years from 1950 through 2020 from the perspective of an immigrant woman from Ireland. It includes her memories of dating in the Sixties, apartment living in the largest city in the world and making the move to the suburbs, the influence of music, television, and the church in her life, returning to Ireland, and community social events. For teachers interested in using this memoir to help students understand culture, family, and faith, this book provides a sociological framework of American culture during the last four decades of the 20th century and the transition into the 21st century by a senior citizen and grandparent. The setting is Long Island, the Bronx and Bergen County, NJ.

The book will also prompt serious questions about how an immigrant teenage girl from Ireland entered the United States under the restrictions of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (McCarran-Walter Act), the role of Catholic Charities and other religious and private agencies with the relocation of people, commercial airline travel in the 1950s, the increased demand for parochial education, raising children, the baby boom generation, the influence of social clubs, the role of women in Irish and American culture, and how the American Dream of Peg Holland compares to the American Dream as defined by Betty Friedan:

"Each suburban wife struggled with it alone...they learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights...." (Rudnick, 72). Friedan goes on to emphasize how societal views have caused women's "greatest ambition" to be marriage and children. Her biggest point eludes that "it is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time." [American Dream Project](#)

For members of a book club, the book provides opportunities for discussion about teenage pregnancy, resilience, perseverance, facing discrimination, gangs, the life of an unmarried woman, struggling with debt, coping with cancer, raising a family, the importance of faith and hope, and if our lives are predetermined by a higher force or subject to chance and luck. The characters are real and their stories are from their hearts. Even if the authors edited phrases or words, the primary source documentation and candid expressions will make your eyes water with sadness and happiness.

For members of a religious discussion group this memoir offers ten examples of situations that require us to hit the pause button and stop and think. For example, the circumstances of a virgin pregnancy, living away from home during her pregnancy, twists and turns of the decision to give a daughter up for adoption, working as a nanny, finding friends, falling in love, purchasing a home, facing devastating health issues, reunion in Ireland, and receiving an unexpected phone call.

For those who may read this book as an individual, I can only provide my perspective as a man, husband, and grandfather. I experienced emotions of sadness, helplessness, empathy, inspiration, encouragement, and thanks for my personal religious beliefs in reading Peg's personal story. It made me think about the teenage mothers I knew, decisions about who to trust, personal hardships and triumphs, the power of forgiveness, and the challenges teenagers and parents face. The characters in this memoir are living examples of these experiences.

I also enjoyed the Irish culture and local color of Long Island, Valentine Ave. in the Bronx, and Hawthorne, NJ. These were all places where I lived but my experience was one of a middle-class man with a college education. To some extent my stereotypes of Irish culture found agreement and yet they were also proven wrong and my perspective of life and culture was broadened.



2314 Valentine Ave. Bronx, NY

*“My prayers were always the same. I prayed to God to help me get over my guilt, and He answered my prayers. After each conversation with Mary, I could feel the healing continue. I began to feel like a person who was more sure of herself. I was no longer stuck beating myself up over something I have no control over anymore. I told myself **Enough already**, I cried so many nights after I gave Mary away and when I was by myself. Finally hearing Mary’s voice and everything she had accomplished in her life shot through me to my core and started to heal me within. It was confirmed I did the right thing.”* (words of Peg Holland O’Hagan in her mid-70s)

The book is available on [Amazon](#). It is written by a husband and wife with professional careers in education. I am honored that Thomas is my former student and years later became my colleague.