

Reading

In the magazine article below, a well-known Irish author, Maeve Binchy, recalls her 'idyllic childhood'.

- 1 What is your idea of an 'idyllic childhood'? List some ideas or words, then compare them with other students.
- 2 Read the article quickly to see if you think Maeve Binchy's childhood was idyllic.
- 3 Read the article in more detail this time and make notes on why Maeve Binchy thought her childhood was idyllic.

- 4 Read the article a final time to find information to complete this description.

Name: Maeve Binchy
Occupation:
Country of origin:
Father's occupation:
Mother's occupation:
Religion:
Type of school attended:
Physical description:
Personality (as a child):



When I was a child

Writer Maeve Binchy recalls her idyllic childhood in Ireland

My parents brought me up to think I was the centre of the universe. They showered me with love and attention and gave me terrific self-confidence. I was the eldest of four. There were three girls and then finally the longed-for boy arrived. We were all indulged, all special. I don't think any one of us was the favourite.

10 My father was a barrister and my mother had been a nurse before she married. She was a big, jolly woman, as big as I am, with a great smile that went right round her face. We never had a lot of money but we had great comfort and lived in a big, shabby old house with nearly an acre of garden looking out over the sea in Dalkey, near Dublin. We each had our own bedroom and we had a maid, Agnes, who is still a friend.

20 We all went to school on the train from Dalkey to Killiney to the Convent of the Holy Child. It was just three miles down the line and now I see it as the most beautiful place, but we never noticed the view when we were children.

I was a terrible goody-goody. At school I was the girl who was always approached if somebody had to write a thank-you letter to a visiting speaker or make the speech of 30 thanks. I was an extrovert. I don't remember any time until I was 16 or 17 that I ever felt self-conscious. I thought I was marvellous because my parents made me feel that way. When I was little they would take me out of bed and bring me down to entertain their friends - to whom I now apologise.

40 I was a very devout little girl. I was going to be a saint, not just a nun. I intended to be the first Saint Maeve. At home we kept hens and when they died of old age we buried them and held a Requiem Mass. I was the priest, of course, and prayed for their souls and put flowers on their graves. We had an honorary grave for the tortoise once because we thought he was dead, though we couldn't find the body. He turned up again - he had only gone away for the winter.

I was a placid child, very content. I never rebelled. It sounds terribly smug, but all I wanted in life came to me. There is a lot of me in the character, Benny, in my book, *Circle of Friends* (Coronet, £4.99). I remember lovely birthday parties as a girl - jellies and cakes with hundreds-and-thousands on them and people singing *Happy Birthday*, and giving me little bars of soap all wrapped up. And like Benny, despite my size, I longed to be dressed in silly frocks in crushed velvet. I was so innocent. My mother told me the facts of life when I was about 12 and I didn't believe her. I told my father I thought Mother must be having delusions!

‘I was going to be a saint, not just a nun’

I was a big, bold, strapping schoolgirl but, in fact, I had nothing to be self-confident about. I wasn't very academic; I was quick-minded, but I was very lazy. My reports weren't good, which distressed my parents. In Ireland in those days you had to pay for education after the age of 14 and I remember my father saying that a good education was all he could afford to give me. Homework was considered very important and every evening the breakfast room would be set up with dictionaries and pens and paper and a big fire going. Daddy would often work with us. I always finished as quickly as possible so I could go off and read my *Girl* or *School Friend* comics.

80 Without any doubt, my favourite teacher at the convent was Sister St Dominic. She was a wonderful woman who made a tremendous impression on me. She saw something in every child and thought we were all great. She managed to put some sense into teaching because she always enjoyed herself so much.



Because of her I became a teacher.

At school I lived a fantasy life. I had a book called the *ABC Shipping Guide* and dreamed of travelling the world. My teachers always said of my essays, 'Try to stick to the facts, Maeve,' because I embroidered and exaggerated so much.

The nuns warned us a lot about lust and sex and I was a bit disappointed during my last two years at school to find there wasn't as much lust and sex going on as we'd been told. By then my friends had boyfriends and I became very self-conscious. Because I was told at home that I was lovely, I thought I was. When I went out to dances and didn't fare so well, I was bitterly disappointed. I then realised that I was big and fat and not so lovely. Nowadays I can't believe how quickly time passes, but when I was a child, the summer holidays seemed to last for ever. They were idyllic, and I put a lot of that into my books. Everything about my childhood has been useful material. ☺

5 Here are some adjectives and nouns used to describe Maeve Binchy. Tick (✓) the adjectives if they describe you as a child. Otherwise write an appropriate related word for yourself above it. (Use a dictionary to help you with this exercise if necessary.)

devout	content	placid
a goody-goody	bold	innocent
a dreamer	an extrovert	strapping
self-conscious	quick-minded	

6 Where is the stress on each of the words in ^{the} activity above?
Mark it with a • above the stressed syllable. Check your answers in a dictionary.

KEY

3 Possible answers:
brought up to think she was centre of universe;
received lots of love and attention; jolly mother;
lots of comfort; maid who became a friend; religion;
some good teachers; summer holidays

4 Occupation: teacher, then writer
Country of origin: Ireland
Father's occupation: barrister
Mother's occupation: nurse, then housewife

Religion: probably Catholic
Type of school attended: convent
Physical description: big and fat (as a teenager)
Personality (as a child): (possible answers) self-confident, goody-goody, extrovert, placid, quick-minded, fanciful, devout, content, innocent, not very academic, lazy