

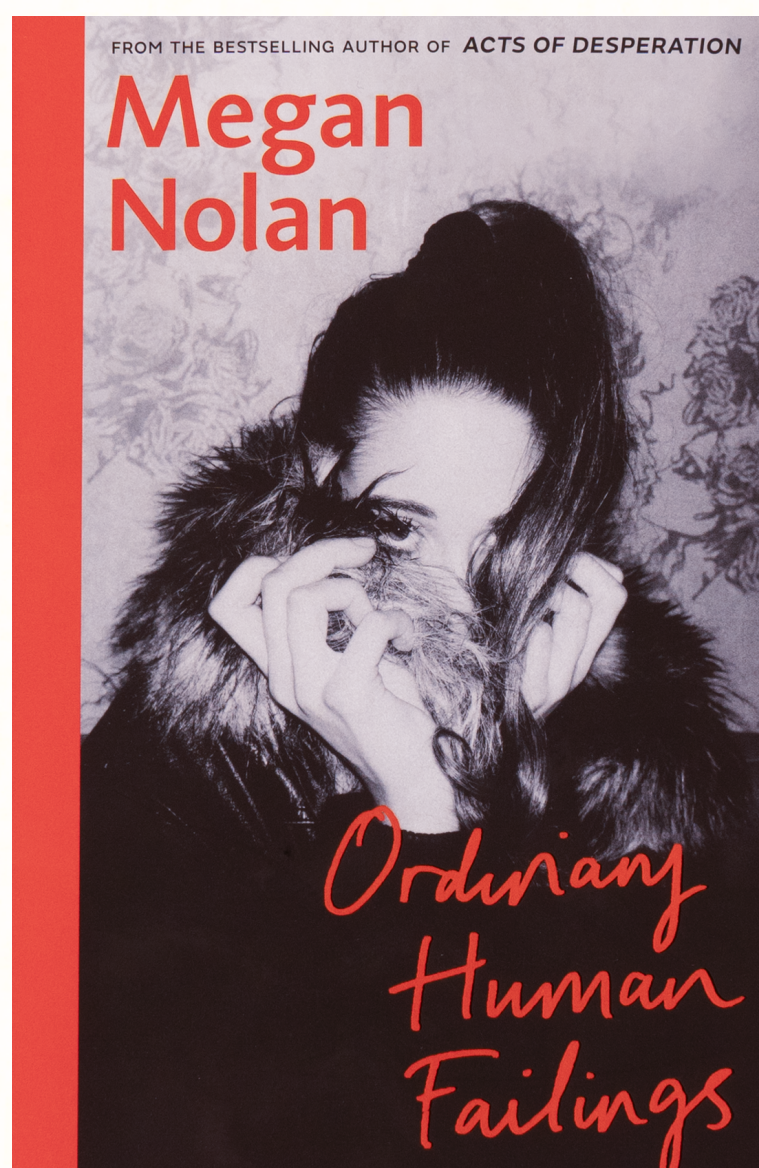
NERO

BOOK AWARDS

Reading Guides

Fiction Shortlist

Ordinary Human Failings by Megan Nolan



Megan Nolan was born in 1990 in Waterford, Ireland and is currently based in London. Her essays and reviews have been published by the *New York Times*, the *White Review*, the *Guardian* and *Frieze* amongst others. Her debut novel, *Acts of Desperation*, was published by Jonathan Cape in 2021 and was the recipient of a Betty Trask Award, shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award, and longlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize.

'This insightful novel holds a microscope up to one family's secrets as they become the centre of a criminal investigation. Lyrical, compassionate and expertly crafted.' -

Fiction judges, 2023 Nero Book Awards

'There had to be something to explain an act of violence like this, to explain a child like Lucy. There had to be something Carmel would say to make some sense of it. That's what she will want to do, he thought, she will want to give an excuse so that Lucy isn't evil, so she hasn't produced an evil child. She wants an excuse – so let her have one. Open up the floor.'

When the body of a small child is discovered on a London estate in the early 1990s, suspicions fall on the Greens, a reclusive Irish family whose ten-year-old daughter was the last person seen with the dead girl. Already regarded as the bad apples within their community, they have become pariahs, leaving them vulnerable to the attentions of tabloid journalist Tom Hargreaves who is hungry for a story that will make his name. Ambitious and contemptuous of the "peasants" who read his paper, he is convinced that the Greens are hiding a dark secret. Determined to uncover it, he persuades the newspaper to put the family up in a hotel where he sets about breaking them down to reveal it. But the stories that he uncovers from the Greens, most notably Carmel, the beautiful, damaged mother of the ten-year-old suspect are not those he is expecting or hoping for but, instead, distressing tales of ordinary human disappointment and dysfunction.

In describing the circumstances and events that have led to the Greens becoming the flawed and damaged people that they are, Nolan invites us to sympathetically consider the corrosive effects of poverty and alcohol abuse, society's diminishment of working-class people and the consequences of intergenerational trauma that can trigger extraordinary human tragedy.

Discussion points:

- The instances of suffering, grief and heartbreak in the novel are described throughout as ordinary human failings. What do you think of the author's use of the words 'ordinary' and 'failings' to describe the experiences of the different members of the Green family?
- Do you think that Tom is aware of his own failings, in particular his lack of morality in his willingness to exploit the Green family for his own professional gain?
- As an adolescent, Carmel had a sense of being special and 'better' than the place she came from. Does this make it harder to feel sympathy towards her?