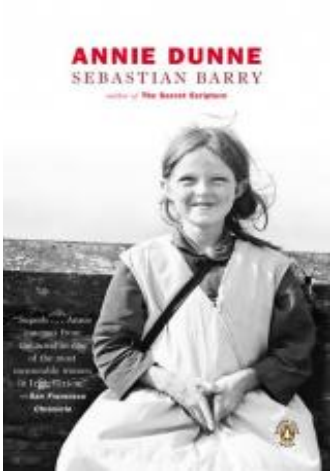
Annie Dunne

by Sebastian Barry



About the Book

How does one hold on to a world that no longer exists? Playwright and novelist Sebastian Barry explores this question in a poignant and exquisitely told story of innocence, loss, and reconciliation. Set in a rural section of Ireland known as Kelsha, "a distant place, over the mountains from everywhere," **Annie Dunne** tells the story of Annie and her cousin Sarah, aging unmarried women who live according to folkways that were already vanishing during the late 1950s when the novel takes place. Their great friendship is their most valuable possession, but Anniehunchbacked and bitter over the way the rest of her family has treated herlives in constant fear that it could be taken away. Quiet and intensely personal, **Annie Dunne** is both a story about and a meditation on the means by which we accommodate a world too big to understand. "Oh, what a mix of things the world is," Annie reflects, "what a flood of cream, turning and turning in the butter churn of things, but that never comes to butter."

One summer Annie's grandniece and grandnephew come to stay with her and Sarah. That same summer, a local handyman, Billy Kerr, begins to court Sarah and becomes more of a presence in the two women's lives. Through Annie's eyes we see the rhythms of their rural lifedrawing water from the well, slaughtering chickens, harnessing their one ponyas well as the ways the encroaching modern world, in the person of Billy, threatens to change it. We also see her guarded hope for a second chance, in the form of the children, to make peace with the new times. The old ways are revealed through Annie's thoughts of her grandfather, a stern, "unseeing" man whose memory Annie reveres. But her grandfather's work, as a policeman for the English, is a clue to Annie's alienation from her proud Irish neighbors. As the noveland Sarah's relationship with Billydevelops, this seemingly simple rural tale unfolds into a historical and romantic drama, with lonely Annie Dunne at the center of a fast-changing world. Annie's struggle to maintain the world just as it was highlights the book's broader theme of the collision between history and individual lives that plays out in even the remotest corners of the globe.

Annie Dunne is at once a love story of the deepest bonds between friends and a tragedy of a woman"one of the most memorable...in Irish fiction" (*San Francisco Chronicle*)whose uncommon kindness is unacknowledged by the people

she cares about the most. With **Annie Dunne**, Sebastian Barry achieves the rare balance of winning the reader's sympathy for a character as bitter as the crab-apples she loves, prompting us to ask vital questions about the many disparities between how we see ourselves and how the world sees usand what those differences can reveal about the loves that sustain us all.

Discussion Guide

1. Looking at a crab-apple tree, with its "generous, bitter arms," Annie Dunne thinks "this is the happiness allowed to me" (p. 43). Why does Annie identify with the crab-apple? How does Sebastian Barry use the hills and trees of Kelsha to describe the people who live there, especially Annie?

2. "Poor Annie Dunne" (p. 20), the villagers say of Annie, referring to her once-influential family. How does Annie's sense of herself as fallen in social rank influence her relationship with her cousin? And with Billy Kerr?

3. "There is not much between the characters of Billy Kerr and Billy the pony" (p. 33), thinks Annie, and yet although we see Billy through Annie's eyes as a foolish lout, the events of the story suggest another side to him. How do Billy's actions?both kind and cruel?contrast with Annie's description of them?

4. Annie often refers to bones?her "old Kelsha bones" (p. 38), "the field sticks of my bones" (p. 40), her mother's "long set of bones" (p. 64). What does this reveal about Annie's sense of the essence of people?

5. "We are blessed in the company of these children," thinks Annie, "it is our chance" (p. 7), but Sarah describes the children as "shadows," into which she can't see (p. 77). How do Sarah and Annie relate to the children in different ways? Do the children come between them?

6. "The world of my youth is wiped away, as if it were only a stain on a more permanent fabric," thinks Annie. "I do not know where this Ireland is now" (p. 95). **Annie Dunne** is a novel about the loss of old ways, but by referring to past times as a place, how does Annie complicate conventional notions of nostalgia?

7. History looms behind Annie's memories, especially that of the revolutionaries who ended English rule in Annie's Ireland. Annie scorns them for having done so, but is her hatred political, or does it come from deeper, more personal emotions? What symbolic role do the historical figures Michael Collins and Eamon De Valera play in Annie's view of her own life?

8. What is the difference between Annie's relationship with her niece and with her nephew? How does the boy become a confidant of Annie's? Why does she describe him as "sean-aimseartha, an old fashioned child" (p. 119)?

9. How does Sarah's and Billy Kerr's "understanding" threaten Annie? Sarah and Annie are as close to each other as two people can be, but they see their relationship differently. What does Annie's "marriage of simple souls" (p. 127) mean to Sarah? What prompts her to put it at risk for Billy Kerr?

10. "You are surrounded by things you never notice," Annie's brother-in-law, Matt, tells her (p 156). Since we see the world through Annie's eyes?ever observant of the land and of Sarah, neglectful of changes in society?it is late in the

book before the scope of her alienation from her surroundings emerges. Who is Annie in the eyes of those around her? What explains the great divide between Annie as she sees herself and the Annie whom others see?

Author Bio

Sebastian Barry was born in Dublin in 1955. The 2018?21 Laureate for Irish Fiction, he is the author of nine novels, five of which have been long- or shortlisted for the Booker Prize, most recently OLD GOD'S TIME (2023). His work has won numerous awards in Ireland, the UK and France, including the Costa Book of the Year Award, the Walter Scott Prize, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In the US, his novels have been recognized by the ALA Carnegie Medal (longlist), the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize (shortlist), and the High Plains Book Award (winner). He lives in County Wicklow, Ireland.

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