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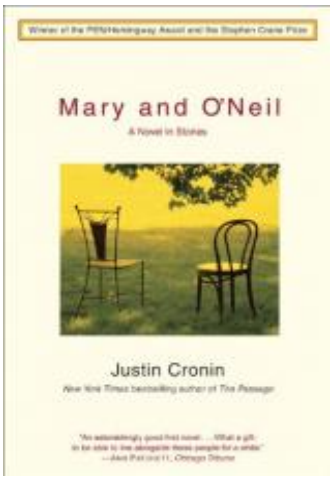
Mary and O'Neil

by Justin Cronin



About the Book

Mary and O'Neil frequently marveled at how, of all the lives they might have led, they had somehow found this one together. When they met at the Philadelphia high school where they'd come to teach, each had suffered a profound loss that had not healed. How likely was it that they could learn to trust, much less love, again?

Justin Cronin's poignant debut traces the lives of Mary Olson and O'Neil Burke, two vulnerable young teachers who rediscover in each other a world alive with promise and hope. From the formative experiences of their early adulthood to marriage, parenthood, and beyond, this novel in stories illuminates the moments of grace that enable Mary and O'Neil to make peace with the deep emotional legacies that haunt them: the sudden, mysterious death of O'Neil's parents, Mary's long-ago decision to end a pregnancy, O'Neil's sister's battle with illness and a troubled marriage. Alive with magical nuance and unexpected encounters, **Mary and O'Neil** celebrates the uncommon in common lives, and the redemptive power of love.

Discussion Guide

1. The deaths of O'Neil's parents, Miriam and Arthur, in the opening story, "Last of the Leaves," haunt O'Neil throughout the rest of the book. When he and his sister, Kay, discover the credit card bill including the charge for the motel where Arthur and Miriam stopped on their fatal trip home, they are deeply disturbed, leading O'Neil to realize "how little he truly knew about his parents." And O'Neil must come to accept that his parents' lives were much more complicated and full of secrets than he had ever imagined. Was the accident that killed them completely an accident, or was it, in some way, an inevitable consequence of choices made? How do secrets kept and secrets shared figure throughout the stories in **Mary and O'Neil**?

2. Among the pivotal events of Mary and O'Neil are Miriam and Kay's breast cancer; Mary's abortion and later, the birth of her daughter, Nora; and Kay's discovery of her husband's infidelity. As a man, is Justin Cronin able to understand and

convey with honesty and accuracy, the thoughts, emotions, details and reactions of his women characters to these quintessentially female experiences?

3. In the story "Orphans," Cronin describes how O'Neil and Kay return to their childhood home to settle their parents' affairs after the car accident. Cronin writes, "the weeks following their parents' death passed quickly and became, for O'Neil, a time of strange and unexpected contentment . . . with each trip to the Goodwill box behind the Price Chopper, each final phone call to a bank or loan company, he felt his parents becoming real to him in a way that they had never been in life. More than real: he felt them move inside him." As he gets older, does O'Neil become increasingly like either one, or both, of his parents? Is his marriage to Mary a mirror of?or a contrast to?Arthur and Miriam's relationship?

4. Miriam and Kay had a difficult relationship. Miriam feels that she and her daughter never really got along, and describes Kay as indifferent to the rest of the family, withdrawn, self-absorbed and dismissive of Miriam. Mary, also, had a distant relationship with her mother. Compare the two mother-daughter relationships.

5. Are there similarities between Arthur's feelings for Dora in "Last of the Leaves" and O'Neil's brief encounter with Patrice in "Orphans?" Do these two romantic episodes indicate ways in which father and son are alike?

Author Bio

Justin Cronin is the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE PASSAGE, THE TWELVE, THE FERRYMAN, THE CITY OF MIRRORS, MARY AND O'NEIL (which won the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Stephen Crane Prize) and THE SUMMER GUEST. Other honors for his writing include a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Whiting Writers? Award. A Distinguished Faculty Fellow at Rice University, he divides his time between Houston, Texas, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

Critical Praise

"An astonishingly good first novel...fully engaging from the first paragraph. What a gift: to be able to live alongside these people for a while."--- *Chicago Tribune*"A literary love story...about the fragility of good fortune and the accidental ways of finding happiness."--- *USA Today*"Justin Cronin must have been a novelist in an earlier life. What else could account for the mature insight and the beautifully controlled technique we find in his debut novel?...Cronin succeeds, touchingly and tenderly, in portraying life itself as a triumph of hope over experience."--- *The Boston Globe* "Justin Cronin's **Mary and O'Neil** is that rare thing: a wholly engrossing story of the ordinary life."--- *Madison Smartt Bell, author of **All Souls' Rising***

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