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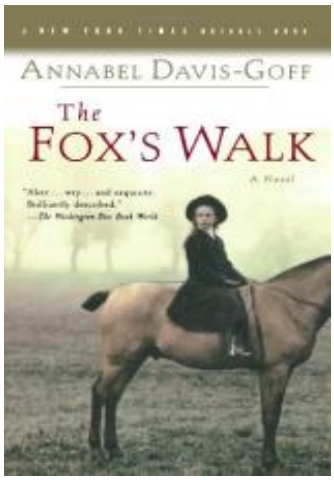
The Fox's Walk

by Annabel Davis-Goff



About the Book

It is 1915 and eight year-old Alice Moore has just been left in the care of her autocratic grandmother at Ballydavid, a lovely old house in the south of Ireland. At first lonely and homesick, Alice gradually becomes involved in the lives of a Catholic boy whom she hero-worships, a psychic countess down on her luck, an admired governess and colorful neighbors. In the background always is the Great War, and in Ireland there is the threat of revolution. While the family mourns an uncle killed in France, blood is spilled closer to home. As tensions mount, Alice must choose between her heritage of privilege, her growing moral conscience, and the demands of the future.

Discussion Guide

1. Annabel Davis-Goff's memoir of her own Anglo-Irish childhood, **Walled Gardens**, opens with a quotation from **The Family Reunion** by T. S. Eliot that includes the words "more is heard than is spoken." Does this apply to the atmosphere at Ballydavid? Consider the following: Grandmother waiting to ring for tea until after the visiting Coughlans leave; Uncle William's behaviour toward the Countess; the tennis match between Inez de Courcy and Rosamund Gwynne.

2. The Fox's Walk opens with the reburial of Roger Casement in Dublin. Alice intertwines an account of the last years of his life, his misguided attempt to aid the Irish Nationalist cause, his arrest, trial, and execution with her story of life at Ballydavid. The Ascendancy considered Casement a traitor. How does Alice's view of him differ from theirs? Do you agree, or not agree, with Miss Kingsley that a man who is prepared to die for his country or his beliefs cannot be considered a traitor or a coward?

3. Alice remains in Ireland while her parents and younger brother return to London. Imagine what Alice's life might have been like if she had returned to England with her parents. She would have avoided the ambush and would not have witnessed the assassination, but she also would not have met Jarvis de Courcy. And her character would not have been

influenced by her grandmother's opinions and rules. Some of which Alice disagreed with, but some of which she seems to have adopted. Do we think that her well-read grandmother in some ways might have had more to offer an intelligent child than did her Financial Times-reading father?

4. "Children should be seen and not heard was a familiar phrase in those days, the unoriginality of the remark equalled only by its sincerity." Throughout the novel Alice is unquestioningly aware of her lack of status within the household -- and equally aware of small symbolic changes in her station. How does Alice's status at Ballydavid change over the course of the book? Compare the views of O'Neill, Bridie, Aunt Katie, and Grandmother. On what does each character base Alice's elevation? Does Alice ever "attain the right to be part of their self-contained and privileged society?"

5. In England there is now a growing movement to ban fox-hunting. Although Alice loves the excitement of hunting, and the experience is clearly valuable to her self-confidence, she dreads becoming proficient enough to find herself in at the kill. Discuss these contradictions.

6. Throughout the novel, Alice is drawn to women like Madame Tchnikov/(Mara), Countess Debussy/(Sonia), and Mrs. Coughlan. Even Mrs. Hitchcock is an object of fascination. What role do these women play in the story? Alice is attracted to them first because of their exotic appearance and because of "an approach to life a good deal more interesting than any she had, so far, been led to believe existed." At what stage in the story does Alice begin to understand that the exclusion of those who are not born into, or do not conform to, the rules of society is part of the price paid to keep her own class and circle exclusive? Are small societies, like the Anglo-Irish of the period described, based largely on the exclusion of others? To what extent, if at all, is that different from the world in which we now live?

7. Describe the relationship between Alice's parents. The gulf and rift between them is one of class and culture, but the resulting difficulties are more of understanding than of snobbishness. Consider how their differences are exacerbated by the presence of Mary's family. Alice's father is a product of his times. The distance between fathers and children in any family affluent enough to employ a nanny or nursemaid was immense. Is he guilty of anything worse than a lack of imagination? When Alice describes her father as being "unsympathetic to problems peculiar to the privileged", do we not, at least, understand his point of view? To what extent do your contemporary views on parenthood influence your opinion for or against him?

8. Alice falls in love with Ballydavid. "Unusually for a child my age, place seemed as important as people. Ballydavid, the old and slightly shabby house and farm, fields and woods . . . took first place in my affections." What accounts for Alice's feelings for Ballydavid? To what extent is Alice choosing the past over the present when she thinks of Ballydavid as her home? In light of the changing political climate in Ireland, to what extent is Alice boarding a ship that most others know they will be obliged to abandon?

9. The Alice who is telling her story is a widow in her late-50s who lives alone and earns a very modest living as a teacher at a local Protestant girls' school on the outskirts of Dublin. The stratum of society depicted in The Fox's Walk is the last before Irish Independence. Alice will grow up during the Troubles and the formation of the Irish Free State. She will live in an emergent nation with a fully articulated policy of isolationism (the subject of Irish neutrality during the Second World War is addressed in **This Cold Country**, a previous novel by Davis-Goff). Why are the external aspects of Alice's life so little changed by the choice she makes in the final chapter of the novel? How does her subsequent life, lived in a historical context, affect her view of a childhood that was, at least in part, idyllic in beauty and innocence?

10. At the meet of the Gaultier Harriers outside the pub at Herald's Cross, Alice observes a moment of tension between O'Neill and Nicholas Rowe. Although she never fully understands what elicited it, she sees it as two powerful adversaries recognizing and acknowledging each other. Nicholas Rowe is a powerful, land-owning Roman Catholic and actively engaged in the cause of Irish Nationalism. O'Neill, who should have less investment in the status quo, has a son in the British Army. Each man seems to be acting against his own self interest. Why do you think he does so? Consider the similarity of this behaviour to that of Casement and Erskine Childers and the other Anglo-Irish nationalists who throughout history gave their lives fighting against English rule and the interests of their own, class, religion, and background.

11. Consider what Nicholas Rowe symbolizes to the Ballydavid workmen and maids. And to Grandmother, who invites him to tea. We see Nicholas Rowe protect Mrs. Hitchcock. To what extent do you imagine O'Neill will be able to protect Ballydavid when the Troubles come?

12. Once Alice's mother has gone back to England, Bridie is the most maternal member of the household. Discuss Alice's relationship with the maids. What does the kitchen offer her that is unavailable in the rest of the house? How does the atmosphere of the kitchen change in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, the shooting of the Clancy boy by an English officer, and the execution of Casement?

13. Before the First World War, Home Rule for Ireland was desired by the greater part of the predominantly Catholic population in the southern part of Ireland. But the predominantly Protestant population in the northern Irish counties opposed Home Rule and had armed themselves in preparation for revolution in the eventuality of Home Rule becoming a reality. The English government prevaricated and the whole question of Home Rule was set aside for the duration of the war. Research and discuss how the seeds for the present tragedy in the North of Ireland were sewn during the time in which this novel takes place?

Author Bio

Annabel Davis-Goff is the author of **The Dower House** and **This Cold Country**, both *New York Times* Notable Books, and of **Walled Gardens**, a memoir. Born in County Waterford, Ireland, she lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

"A gently compelling read, rewarding and sharply observed."

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Publication Date: September 7, 2004
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Mariner Books
ISBN-10: 0156030101
ISBN-13: 9780156030106