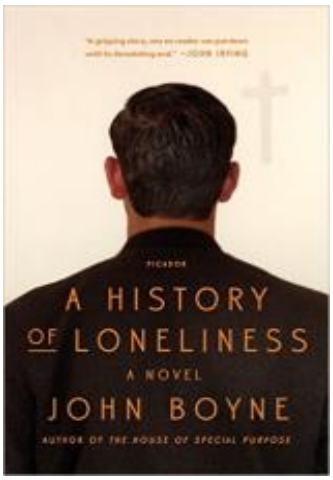
A History of Loneliness

by John Boyne



About the Book

Propelled into the priesthood by a family tragedy, Odran Yates is full of hope and ambition. When he arrives at Clonliffe Seminary in the 1970s, it is a time in Ireland when priests are highly respected, and Odran believes that he is pledging his life to ?the good.?

Forty years later, Odran?s devotion is caught in revelations that shatter the Irish people?s faith in the Catholic Church. He sees his friends stand trial, colleagues jailed, the lives of young parishioners destroyed, and he grows wary of venturing out in public for fear of disapproving stares and insults. At one point, he is even arrested when he takes the hand of a young boy and leads him out of a department store while looking for the boy?s mother.

But when a family event opens wounds from his past, he is forced to confront the demons that have raged within the church and to recognize his own complicity in their propagation, within both the institution and his own family.

A novel as intimate as it is universal, A HISTORY OF LONELINESS is about the stories we tell ourselves to make peace with our lives. It confirms John Boyne as one of the most searching storytellers of his generation.

Discussion Guide

1. In the opening chapter, Odran describes his relationship with his sister, Hannah, and with his nephews, Aidan and Jonas. What accounts for the vast differences in the way these siblings respond to their circumstances? How do their choices and temperaments compare to those of your brothers and sisters?

2. How were Hannah and Odran shaped by their mother?s transformation from glamorous Aer Lingus flight attendant to deeply religious widow? What did she reveal to them about the search for fulfillment in life?

3. Odran finds himself well suited to the life of a priest, even though he was coerced by his mother. Discuss the various paths to the priesthood that are described in the novel. Do you believe that God ?calls? us to various professions?

4. One of the struggles explored in A HISTORY OF LONELINESS is the process of making peace with grief. What does the death of Odran?s father teach Odran about human nature? Does he ever resolve his guilt over the fact that Cathal died instead of himself? How is Odran affected by watching his sister and nephews mourn the death of Kristian?

5. The novel opens with the line ?I did not become ashamed of being Irish until I was well into the middle years of my life.? What does it take for Odran to define himself throughout his life? What shapes his view of other national identities, such as America during the second Bush presidency, or Kristian?s Lutheran Norwegian homeland?

6. As the scenes shift between decades, what cultural changes does John Boyne show us? What is lost and gained by the declining confidence in church leaders described over the course of Odran?s career?

7. In Chapter 5, Odran recalls Katherine (his English neighbor with a penchant for lollipops) and his subsequent interrogation by Father Haughton. At that point in his life, what does Odran believe about sexual sin? As a grown man, why is he easily able to accept Jonas, despite church doctrine? Do you consider Odran?s vow of celibacy to be useful or harmful?

8. How did your perception of Tom shift throughout the novel? Did you applaud his rebelliousness? Did you ever doubt that he was abusing Brian? Was Tom right when he said that a culture of repression leads to abuse?

9. What did Odran discover about himself during his time in Rome? How did his obsession with a beautiful woman affect him? How did personally serving the Pope change his outlook on church hierarchy?

10. Odran vividly recalls his interactions with strangers who made assumptions about him based on his clerical collar, from fellow train passengers who lauded him years ago to angry accusers as he grew older. Even Tom accuses him of being inadequate for merely serving as a chaplain in the sheltered world of Terenure College. As a caregiver and an intellectual, what is Odran?s natural place in the church? What obligations did he accept with ordination?

11. In the book?s closing pages, when Tom is released from prison, Odran asks him if he?ll be lonely. Tom replies, ?I will, of course. But then I have a history of loneliness, Odran. Don?t you?? What led them to be outsiders? Throughout his life, what solace does Odran find in being alone?

12. How did the novel change your views on the Catholic Church?s sex abuse scandal? How does the complicity of the fictional characters reflect reality?

13. How does A HISTORY OF LONELINESS enhance the themes of history and fate explored in other novels by John Boyne that you have read?

Author Bio

John Boyne is the author of THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS, THE HEART'S INVISIBLE FURIES, A LADDER TO THE SKY, THE WEIGHT OF ANGELS, and THE ELEMENTS, which won both Le Prix Femina

Étranger and the Prix du Roman Fnac in France. He lives in Dublin.

Critical Praise

?The complex architecture of this haunting novel is seamlessly constructed. The path to the priesthood that Odran Yates follows is both understandable and sympathetic. John Boyne has created a character who holds himself accountable for the sins of others. No writer today handles guilt with as much depth and sadness. As Father Yates takes himself to task for all he *didn?t*do, nothing less than the sexual duplicity and cover-ups of the Catholic Church are indicted. This is John Boyne?s most important novel and of vital importance to Irish history; it is also a gripping story, one no reader can put down until its devastating end.?

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