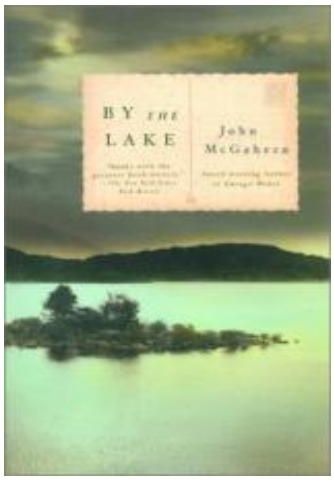
By the Lake

by John McGahern



About the Book

Joe Ruttledge and his wife Kate have left their jobs in London to live on a farm in Ireland, near where Joe was born. In doing so, they enter into a community in which people know each other's ways intimately, but usually can't afford to speak the truth directly to each other. Among the neighbors are the gentle Jamesie and his wife Mary, who haven't spent a night away from the lake in seventeen years; Patrick Ryan, the builder who never quite finishes what he starts; John Quinn, who will stop at nothing to make sure his sexual needs are met; Bill Evans, the farmhand whose orphaned childhood was marked with cruelty and whose adulthood bears the scars; and the wealthiest man in town, Joe's uncle, known locally as the Shah.

A year in the lives of these and other characters unfolds through the richly observed rituals of work and play, of religious observance and annual festivals, and the details of the changing seasons, the cycles of birth and death. With deceptive simplicity and eloquence, McGahern reveals the fundamental workings of human nature as it encounters the extraordinary trials and pleasures, terrors and beauty, of ordinary life.

Discussion Guide

1. Why does McGahern open the novel with the image of stillness on the lake? Why are the swans, the lake, the heron, the farm animals, and the changing seasons constantly juxtaposed against the human action related in these pages? Which descriptive passages are most striking? What is Joe Ruttledge's relationship to nature, his farm, and his animals?

2. McGahern introduces a number of characters in the Ruttledges' circle: Jamesie and Mary, Johnny, Patrick Ryan, John Quinn, and the Shah, among others. How does McGahern make these people seem real? What are their defining qualities? Which characters are most likeable and why?

3. When asked what's wrong with his life in London, Joe Ruttledge replies, "Nothing but it's not my country and I never

feel it's quite real or that my life there is real. That has its pleasant side as well. You never feel responsible or fully involved in anything that happens" [p. 23]. How is Joe's reply to Jimmy Joe McKiernan understood in the context of the rest of the novel?

4. How does McGahern use the character of Johnny to depict the emigrant's life and the painful uprooting of so many of the Irish who left home? When Jamesie says, "He'd have been better if he'd shot himself instead of the dogs" [p. 9], what does he mean? How welcome is Johnny when he comes home?

5. The brutality of Bill Evans's life as an orphan [pp. 10?16] casts a shadow on the kindly behavior that seems to pervade the novel. How has Bill Evans, now an old man, been scarred by his experiences? Why is Joe Ruttledge willing to be unfailingly generous and patient with Bill Evans?

6. **By the Lake** is a novel of manners that, like the work of Jane Austen, scrutinizes the ways in which human beings interact in a small community. What is most noticeable about how Joe, Kate, Jamesie, and Mary behave toward one another? How important are the qualities of generosity, humor, and patience? Why is so much careful attention paid to certain ceremonial aspects of life, such as when the Ruttledges host a dinner party for Jamesie's extended family [pp. 288?92]?

7. There is much talk in **By the Lake**; the rhythms of talk and the sound of human voices are central to the novel. Why is Jamesie so thirsty for gossip? Why is the need for stories so important in a small rural community? Why do some people reveal a lot about themselves, while some reveal almost nothing? For instance, why do we learn so little of Joe Ruttledge's private life while we learn so much of John Quinn's?

8. The novel is marked by a distinct lack of action. At one point, Joe realizes, "The days were quiet. They did not feel particularly quiet or happy but through them ran the sense, like an underground river, that there would come a time when these days would be looked back on as happiness, all that life could give of contentment and peace" [p. 234]. Why is contentment difficult to describe within the conventional expectations of plot in fiction?

9. Writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, John Sutherland pointed out that "One cannot appreciate McGahern's prose unless one understands the strenuous purging that produces his final text. For every published page, he writes about six that are discarded. The **By the Lake** we have is the redaction of a novel of more than a thousand pages. Pruning is the essence of McGahern's art." What light does this shed on the novel's prose style, its structure, and the arc of time it covers?

10. Given that Jamesie and Joe are very good friends, is it surprising that Joe refuses to speak about the reason he and Kate have no children? Does the episode of the black lamb shed any light on this issue? How does McGahern comment on the curious relationship between what is shared and what is kept private in such a tiny community?

11. Does Joe Ruttledge, given his education and his time spent in London, fit in socially when he comes to live by the lake? Are Joe and Kate unusual in their willingness to give up a cosmopolitan life for a rural backwater? Does McGahern imply that it takes a very alert, observant sensibility to enjoy life in such a quiet place?

12. Why are details of historical time, as well as the characters' ages, deliberately withheld? How relevant is the fact that this community is close to the border with Northern Ireland, or that we hear of an atrocity that took place at nearby

Enniskillen? What is the significance of Jamesie's story about the ambush by the Black and Tans, which is commemorated every year [pp. 271?278]?

13. Discuss the crisis caused by Johnny's decision to return home to live with Jamesie and Mary. The narrator tells us: "The timid, gentle manners, based on a fragile interdependence, dealt in avoidances and obfuscations. Edges were softened, ways found round harsh realities. What was unspoken was often far more important than the words that were said. . . . It was a language that hadn't any simple way of saying no" [p. 210]. What is valuable, and what is less so, about such manners? Is Joe right to offer to intervene in this family matter?

14. What narrative effect is achieved by the description of the laying out of Johnny's body? Why does Joe volunteer to do this? How important is the fact that the novel includes a death, a wake, and a funeral? Why does the story end as it does, with the shed unfinished, and Ruttledge thinking that he'll decide whether to take Patrick Ryan up on the offer to finish it?

15. Some of the most important questions addressed by this novel were asked by reviewer Hermione Lee, who wrote in the *London Observer*: "This great and moving novel, which looks so quiet and provincial, opens out through its small frame to our most troubling and essential questions. How well do we remember? How do we make our choices in life? Why do we need repetition? What is to remain of us? Above all, what can happiness consist in?" How does McGahern's novel address these issues?

Author Bio

John McGahern is the author of five highly acclaimed novels and four collections of short stories. His novel **Amongst Women** won the GPA Book Award and the Irish Times Award, was short-listed for the Booker Prize, and was made into a four-part BBC television series. He has received the Society of Authors' Award, the American-Irish Award, and the Prix Etrangere Ecureuil, among other awards and honors. His work has appeared in anthologies and has been translated into many languages. He lives in Dublin.

Critical Praise

"A superb, earthly pastoral . . . a knowing, quick-witted performance . . . McGahern, a supreme chronicler [of] the closing chapters of traditional Irish rural life, has created a novel that lives and breathes."

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