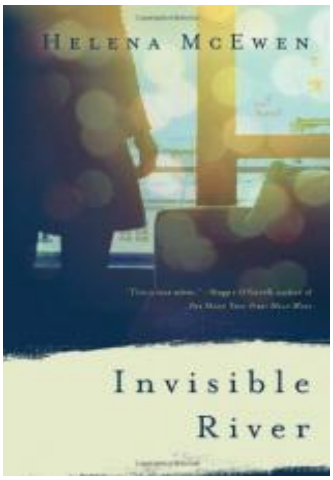
Invisible River

by Helena McEwen



About the Book

Evie is going away to school, but she can?t seem to leave her worries behind. Even as her train speeds toward her future at a London art school, Evie imagines her father drinking alone in their tiny cottage in Cornwall. But soon Evie is swept up in the colors of London: the streets, the traffic, the people, and especially the Thames River, which she decides she must paint.

Evie?s friends at art school face challenges of their own. Rob, a painter with a primitive imagination, is about to become a young mother. Bianca, a bubbly Italian student, struggles with health problems. Cecile, a former ballerina, faces biting criticism of her flowery paintings. And Evie finds herself falling for Zeb, an older student who makes space-age sculptures out of metal and light.

Evie?s education comes to a halt when she finds her father passed out on her doorstep. She struggles to help her father stay sober, but he disappears into the London streets, never to return. As Evie mourns her father and faces the forgotten history of her mother?s life and death, she must learn how to incorporate loss into her life --- and into her art.

Discussion Guide

1. Invisible River opens with Evie boarding a train to London and leaving her father behind. Why does she still ?feel the pull of my father left alone,? (3) even as the train speeds away from Cornwall? How does Evie?s arrival in London help break that pull, and how does Cornwall keep a hold on her feelings and imagination?

2. As Evie sees her school for the first time, she thinks, ?I only had to cross the road to walk into the tall glass cube that would be my art school for the next three years.? (4) How does the architecture of the art school --- its glass, mezzanines, and various studios --- influence Evie?s work and her friendships?

3. What are Evie?s first impressions of her new friends at art school: Bianca, Rob, Cecile, and Zeb? How does each of these friendships begin, and how does each evolve as Evie?s family problems catch up with her in London?

4. As Evie studies Rob?s primitive paintings, she realizes that ?she knows how to make an unseen world into pictures and I want to know too.? (27) What does Evie admire about Rob?s art? How does Rob?s pregnancy influence her creativity? How does Rob help Evie discover her own methods and subjects?

5. ?Zeb says that around every river is an invisible river?and the health of the river depends on the health of the invisible river.? (29) What ?invisible river? surrounds Evie in London and in Cornwall? How do Evie?s health, happiness, and artistic vision evolve as her life circumstances change? How is Evie able to discover an ?invisible reality? through her art? (292)

6. Although Evie?s father is absent throughout most of the novel, he still has a strong presence in Invisible River. What kind of father does he seem to be? What faults and strengths does he possess? What does Evie learn from him?

7. Analyze Evie and Zeb?s relationship through the small gifts they exchange. What objects does Zeb leave for Evie, and how does she reciprocate? What do these gifts say about each of these characters and the feelings between them?

8. Consider the critiques that each student faces of her art. Why are the teachers so disapproving of their students? work? How does Evie react to Sergei?s criticism? What kind of art does Sergei want to see, and what kind of art does Evie want to make?

9. When Evie finds her father on her doorstep in London, she feels ?a horrible combination of disgust and tenderness and anger and panic.? (98) How does Evie sort through these mixed emotions? Is Evie able to forgive herself for kicking her father out? Why or why not?

10. Consider some of the London locations that inspire Evie, including the London Stone, the Museum of London, Hyde Park, the city?s hidden gardens, and the Thames River. What does each of these London sites contribute to Evie?s art? How does the city look and feel to Evie, and how does she translate its energy into paintings?

11. How does Evie finally remember her mother?s death and funeral? What images and feelings can Evie recall from when she was five? How does Magda help Evie through the mourning process when she loses each of her parents?

12. Consider Evie?s trip to Cornwall for her father?s funeral. What is her state of mind during this trip? How does she emerge from this difficult period, and how does her character change afterward?

13. When Evie, Rob, Bianca, and Cecile paint a picture together in the sculpture yard, they end up with ?the wildest painting of London you?ve ever seen.? (246) Analyze the multitude of images and techniques that the girls contribute to this group painting. How do their styles and subjects work together? What comes out of their artistic collaboration?

14. Trace Evie?s artistic growth throughout Invisible River. What colors inspire her when she first arrives in London? How does her father?s arrival and disappearance affect her artwork? How does her mourning process color her canvases? Why does Evie feel that ?now I?ve found my own way of working? (271) when she discovers the process of monoprinting?

15. Invisible River ends with Evie and Zeb dancing at the degree show party, ?and circles of coloured light are exploding behind my eyes, because the world is being born.? (301) What does this newborn world look and feel like to Evie? What new possibilities are coming to light?

Author Bio

Helena McEwen grew up in Scotland and studied painting at the Chelsea and Camberwell schools of art in London. She is the author of two highly acclaimed novels, **The Big House** and **Ghost Girl**. **Invisible River** marks her American debut. McEwen lives in Scotland and Egypt.

Critical Praise

"Scottish author McEwen (**Ghost Girl**, 2005) makes good use of her own art training, portraying artists struggling to express their ideas, using vividly described colors that sometimes glow and glitter, in fiction that proves a visual feast"

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Publication Date: February 1, 2011
Paperback: 320 pages
Publisher: Bloomsbury USA
ISBN-10: 1608192660
ISBN-13: 9781608192663