ReadingGroupGuides
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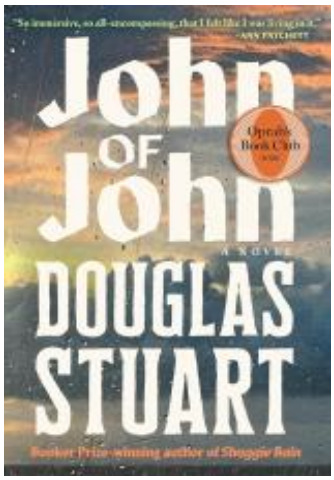
John of John

by Douglas Stuart



About the Book

From the Booker Prize-winning and *New York Times* bestselling author of SHUGGIE BAIN and YOUNG MUNGO comes a vivid, moving novel following a young man returning to his Hebridean island home, a portrait of a father?s expectations and a son?s desires.

Out of money and with little to show for his art school education, John-Calum Macleod takes the ferry back home to the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides to find that little has changed except for him. He returns to the windswept croft and the two pillars of his childhood: his father John, a sheep farmer, tweed weaver and lay preacher in the local Presbyterian church, and his maternal grandmother Ella, a profanity-loving Glaswegian whose steady warmth helped Cal weather the sudden departure of his mother.

Cal privately wonders if any lonely men might be found on the barren hillsides of home, while John is dismayed by his son?s long hair, strange clothes, and seeming unwillingness to be Saved. But Cal isn't the only one in the croft house who is keeping secrets. As lambing season turns to shearing season, the threads holding the community together become increasingly frayed, and nothing will remain as it was before.

JOHN OF JOHN is a singular novel about duty, passion and the transformative power of the truth. It is a magnificent literary work that cements Douglas Stuart's reputation as one of our greatest novelists working today.

Discussion Guide

1. JOHN OF JOHN begins in a solitary red phone box in Edinburgh as Cal Mcleod is summoned home after four years in art school by his strict Calvinist father, John. While Cal?s postgraduation life in Edinburgh sounds bleak, returning to his sternly pious father after a taste of modernity and freedom is less enticing still. Did you question his decision to return home to Harris? Would you, in a similar situation, have stayed in Edinburgh?

2. The Isle of Harris presents a hypnotic but severe backdrop of hard stone, dark skies, scabbed hillsides and black tar roads that impact the mood of nearly every scene. Yet, as traditional Scottish home weavers, John and Cal see the world in vividly distinct color. How did John and Cal?s shared --- and deeply sensitive --- reckoning of color stack up against an otherwise cold, difficult relationship?

3. Doll?s self-assessment is brutal. Speaking of the girls he knows from the island, he says, ?They look at me like I?m a life sentence.? Being the only Macdonald son, he is the darling of his mother?s eye but is sentenced to life at the croft, and on the boat. Being tied to land you will never own and will die poor trying to keep seems a heavy burden to bear in an emptying village. Can you think of a comparable familial or professional scenario now, 30 years on in the United States?

4. Throughout the story, the characters? relationships are partly defined by the use of Gaelic vs. English. This usage can indicate intimacy, remove, respect, exclusion or ownership, and Gaelic cloaks the cruelty of the scripture with its beauty and rhythm. When the characters slipped out of Gaelic and into English, or punctuated English usage with Gaelic, how did you feel? Were you surprised to discover which characters ultimately understood Gaelic?

5. Once back at the family croft in Falabay, Cal is abruptly faced with a present littered with unresolved conflicts and relationships from his childhood, including the decades-long fallout of his father?s closeted homosexuality. While the reader is let in on this secret early and steadily throughout the story, Cal doesn?t realize until the end that his father has been in a relationship with their close friend and neighbor, Innes, since before Cal was born. What did you make of Cal?s blind spot as you moved through the story?

Guide written by Paula Cooper

Author Bio

Douglas Stuart is a Scottish-American author. His *New York Times* bestselling debut novel, SHUGGIE BAIN, won prizes, including the 2020 Booker Prize and the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, was a finalist for the National Book Award and the PEN/Hemingway Award, and was named one of the ?25 Best Books of the 21st Century? by the *Sunday Times* (UK).

His second novel, YOUNG MUNGO, was a national bestseller, longlisted for the Andrew Carnegie Medal and a finalist for the British Book Award, and one of the most highly acclaimed books of the year. His third and latest novel is JOHN OF JOHN. His stories have been published in the *New Yorker*, and his essays have featured on *Literary Hub*. He lives in New York City.

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