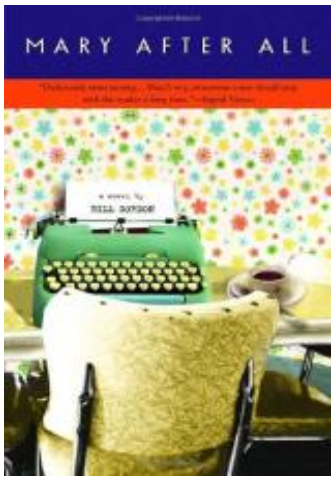
Mary After All: A Novel

by Bill Gordon



About the Book

In the tradition of Roddy Doyle's **The Woman Who Walked Into Doors** comes a brilliant feat of literary ventriloquism, a debut novel by a male author introducing a one-of-a-kind female narrator.

Meet Mary Nolan (née Marelli), a tough-talking Jersey City native who comes of age during the turbulent 1970s. Adored by the small-time mafia types in her extended Italian American family --- formidable but doting figures like her grandpa Louie, Tony the Horse, and Charlie Cuppacoffee --- Mary grew up believing she could always count on men to protect her. But after marrying young to escape her parents, Mary finds herself sidelined by life with a philandering husband and two needy young sons, her dreams as shattered as the city around her.

By turns hilarious and heartbreaking, Mary tells of her unusual route to independence, and about the lives she touches --- and is touched by --- along the way. From Aunt Dot and Aunt Loretta, who get her started in "business," to the ex-nuns who listen to her troubles even as they ask her for relationship advice, to the nosy neighborhood housewives determined to befriend her, Mary finds allies in the unlikeliest of places. How she learns to stand on her own "legitimately" --- triumphantly --- is the heart of Bill Gordon's remarkable first novel.

Discussion Guide

1. What do Mary's childhood memories tell us about her? What did the story regarding Tony the Horse and math teacher Mr. Bauer indicate about Mary's understanding of the real world?

2. Did Mary ever see her mother as powerful? How was Mary's life transformed by her mother's scleroderma diagnosis?

3. Discuss the voice of the novel. How would you describe Mary's storytelling style? What personality traits shine through in the way she communicates with us?

4. After meeting on a Ferris wheel in Seaside Heights, Bobby and Mary soon became an item. Do you believe they were in love when they married? Was her mother motivated by wisdom or jealousy when she told Mary not to marry Bobby? Why was Mary's father more accepting of him?

5. What accounts for the differences between the way Mary and her mother handle an unfaithful husband? Did Bobby and Mary's father have similar personalities?

6. How does Peg's life compare to Mary's? Which one of them ultimately has more freedom? How was that freedom obtained?

7. What do Miss Hughes and Miss Warnock teach Mary about the dating scene as they visit "fern bars"? What does Mary teach them about becoming "a catch"? Does Mary's definition of an ideal woman shift during the last half of the novel, or does she maintain the same parameters for acceptable womanhood throughout her life? Does she believe that alluring physical appearance and a sharp mind are equally necessary for a woman's success?

8. What did Mary hope to gain by having sessions with Merna? Was Mary right about Merna's need for a makeover? Would Mary have recovered faster or more slowly without the Valium?

9. How would you have responded to a revelation like the one Mary hears about Dolores and Bobby?

10. Discuss the parenting styles illustrated in **Mary After All**. Is Bobby a good father, in spite of being a bad husband? How does Mary's treatment of her children differ from her mother's?

11. How does Charlie Cupacoffee compare to the other men in Mary's life? Why was she drawn to him over the years? Did the manner of his death reflect his true personality?

12. Do Aunt Loretta and Aunt Dot care for Mary in equal measure? Did Mary's qualities as a bookie apply to other aspects of her life as well?

13. When Mary at last hires Jeff as her attorney, what does she fear most? Why are Mary and Bobby more successful as a couple after their divorce?

14. Are Mary's employment arrangements with Mr. Butler fair? Did Mary negotiate well on behalf of herself? How does financial independence affect her emotional life?

15. Both the setting and the time period of Mary After All shape the lives of the characters. In what way does Mary's story mirror the transitioning neighborhoods she calls home? Could her life have unfolded in a similar way during her mother's generation?

16. Who are the colorful characters that shape your family legacy? Do contemporary families have a better chance of enjoying "the middle" chapters of life that Mary describes in the novel's closing paragraphs?

Author Bio

Bill Gordon's work has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Mississippi Review*, *New York Press*, *Christopher Street*, and *Downtown*. He received an MFA from Columbia University. He grew up in Jersey City and now lives in New York. **Mary After All** is his first novel.

Critical Praise

"With remarkable insight into the life of an ordinary woman and an uncanny instinct for finding the perfect detail, Bill Gordon has created a vital,memorable chraracter who transcends her circumstances and takes on almost heroic proportions."

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