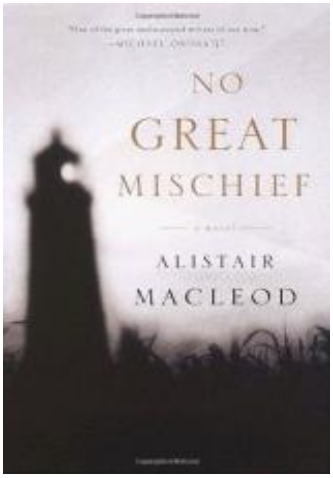
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No Great Mischief

by Alistair MacLeod



About the Book

Alistair MacLeod musters all of the skill and grace that have won him an international following to give us **No Great Mischief**, the story of a fiercely loyal family and the tradition that drives it.

Generations after their forebears went into exile, the MacDonalds still face seemingly unmitigated hardships and cruelties of life. Alexander, orphaned as a child by a horrific tragedy, has nevertheless gained some success in the world. Even his older brother, Calum, a nearly destitute alcoholic living on Toronto's skid row, has been scarred by another tragedy. But, like all his clansman, Alexander is sustained by a family history that seems to run through his veins. And through these lovingly recounted stories-wildly comic or heartbreakingly tragic-we discover the hope against hope upon which every family must sometimes rely.

Discussion Guide

1. Why might the author have chosen the narrator Alexander to be an orthodontist by profession? Is his choice of profession connected in some way to Calum's infected tooth episode during their boyhood [p. 79]? What is Alexander's attitude towards his own profession? Is he proud or ashamed? He writes that he hopes to make his patients more beautiful than they were before [p. 62] or, as his grandma might say, he is "in the business of 'improving on God' " [p. 103]. How does Alexander's profession reflect a kind of attempt to find an explanation for his past or to escape from it?

2. When Alexander first arrives at Calum's apartment, Calum accuses him of being there because of their grandma's dictum: "Always look after your own blood" [p. 14]. Does Alexander in fact visit Calum out of obligation? Guilt? What is his relationship with his older brother? Is either one the man who has "everything or nothing" [p. 71]? How would you describe the author's treatment of the other two surviving brothers, and how does it affect the reader's understanding of Alexander's relationship with his family?

3. Alexander thinks it is not important which liquor he buys for his dying alcoholic brother, rather he reflects, "What is important is that I will return" [p. 170]. Is Alexander's trip to his brother's apartment that afternoon more than just a physical experience? Is it in any way a spiritual homecoming?

4. From an early age, when femininity distinguishes her from the older brothers [p. 74], Alexander's sister's role in the narrative is unique. Why does Alexander choose to tell us about his family and his Scottish heritage through his twin sister's personal recollections of their family life and her revealing trip back to Scotland? How would you characterize his relationship with his sister? What is the significance of the fact that the author refers to Alexander's sister by her given name, Catherine, only once [p. 109], and that occurrence appears not directly from Alexander, but in a letter from their uncle and aunt?

5. In the beginning, the narrator explains, "This is a story of lives which turned out differently than was intended" [p. 57]. Is it really a matter of lives turning out differently than intended, or are the MacDonald children's lives a result of the choices they have made? Calum looks at his parents' death this way: "If I had been with them I might have saved them" [p. 209]. But Alexander has a different perspective: "If you had been with them you would have gone down too" [p. 209]. Could Calum's life have turned out differently if he had felt lucky, instead of guilty? Are Alexander's and Calum's lives impacted more by their own personal past or by their entire family's legacy?

6. Does the saying on the Toronto woman's T-shirt-- "Living in the past is not living up to our potential" [p. 60]--mirror the message of the novel? How does the past hold back the MacDonald family?

7. At the end of the novel, Grandma describes Grandpa and their "other grandfather" as a balance to each other [p. 264]. How would you describe the relationship between the grandfathers? Is it like any of the other relationships among family members in the clan? How are the grandfathers' different feelings about their past and their views of history indicative of their different characters?

8. As related in the novel, General Wolfe describes the members of the MacDonald clan who fought under his command at Quebec by writing in a letter, "They are hardy, intrepid, accustomed to a rough country, and no great mischief if they fall."[p. 237]. According to historians, Wolfe was referring to the two motives for recruiting the Highlanders to the British Army for King George in the Seven Years' War: their stamina as well as the possibility of removing them as a threat to the monarchy. Alexander's grandfather characterized Wolfe's description as a "cynical comment" [p. 109], and his sister likens the MacDonald clan to a "great sports team which may have lost faith in its management or its coach, but are out there anyway in the bloodied mud and the smoke, giving their hearts and their sinew not for 'management' but for the shared history of one another" [pp. 237-8]. Is Wolfe's description of the MacDonalds a source of pride or a burden to the family? What is the significance of the author's allusion to Wolfe's quote for the title of the novel?

9. Why do the family members speak Gaelic to each other more and more as they get older?

10. What role does Alexander play in the Fern Picard incident? How is he both an active participant and an outside observer? In what other places in the novel is he both participant and observer?

11. Does Alexander judge Calum's behavior? Fern Picard's? Alexander MacDonald's from San Francisco? The narrator comments that sending the stolen money back to Fern Picard is "the fitting thing to do" [p. 261]. Is that an appropriate choice of words under the circumstances? Is there a presence of morality in the novel? Does Alexander ever give the

reader an idea of what he thinks is right and wrong?

12. How would you describe the concept of time in the novel? How do the repeated incidents in which *clann Chalum Ruaidh* members recognize each other affect the concept of time? Is time linear, or, as in the darkness of the mines, does time seem "to compress and expand almost simultaneously" [p. 199]?

13. When Alexander's brother returns to Scotland, in a matter of minutes a fellow clan member spots him and invites him to be his business partner, saying, "If only the ships had come from France" [p. 263]. The family members greet each other with Robert the Bruce's quote from 1314, "My hope is constant in thee, Clan Donald" [pp. 88, 11, 202]. Are these incidents an example of how the family continues to stick together despite their hardships and differences? Does it sometimes seem as if the family's reliving of their defeat borders on an absurd, almost existentialist condition?

14. What is the significance of the author's descriptions of the migrant workers in Ontario and of the Zulu and Masai tribes in Africa? Are all of these races displaced peoples--like *clann Chalum Ruaidh*? How are they different? Is the description of Alexander's wife's brief family history similar or different from these other people's [p. 274]? What is the significance of the point in the narrative at which the author chooses to place these particular passages?

15. What is the author's attitude towards the miners? How are the miners' lives similar to those of the migrant workers?

16. Echoing like refrains throughout the novel are the mottoes "We are all better when we're loved" and "Stick with your blood." How are these two concepts manifest in Alexander's family? What relationships in the tale are governed by the former credo and which ones by the latter?

17. What is the point of Alexander MacDonald having stolen the wallet that precipitated Calum's attack on Fern, resulting in his ultimate conviction for second-degree murder? Do the MacDonalds simultaneously survive and perish because they "stick with their blood"?

18. The author frequently uses compound metaphors, such as the many metaphors for change on page 72. At what other points in the narrative does the author use this style of compounding metaphors? How does his use of both compound and recurrent metaphors as well as other stylistic devices, such as repetition, reinforce the themes of the novel? How does the author use Gaelic language and music to set the style and tone of the novel? In what ways does the novel itself mimic a Gaelic song?

19. Why do the men of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh*, in particular Calum, have such strong relationships with animals? What does it say about their characters? How do their relationships with animals compare to their relationships with other men? The author writes of the *clann Chalum Ruaidh* dogs, "It was in those dogs to care too much and to try too hard" [p. 57]. Does this describe the dogs or their masters?

20. Alexander explains, "The 'lamp of the poor' is hardly visible in urban southwestern Ontario, although there are many poor who move disjointedly beneath it. And the stars are seldom clearly seen above the pollution of prosperity" [p. 192]. What is the narrator's attitude towards affluence--his own and that of others?

21. The author writes, "In the waters near Glencoe perhaps the mythical 'king of the herring' still swims. If he exists, perhaps he is as complicated as many other leaders. He is regarded as a friend to some, but those who follow him may do

so at their peril. In any case there are no MacDonalds who wait for him and his bounty, and perhaps without their beliefs he is just another fish, who should be careful where he swims" [p. 274]. How does this view of the clan simultaneously capture Grandpa's and Grandfather's different views of their common history? What is more crippling to Alexander's family: the lack of beliefs or the fear of not having any?

Author Bio

Alistair MacLeod was born in North Battleford, Saskatchewan in 1936 and raised among an extended family in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. His early studies were at the Nova Scotia Teachers College, St. Francis Xavier, the University of New Brunswick, and Notre Dame, where he earned his Ph.D. In his early years, to finance his education he worked as a logger, a miner, and a fisherman. Dr. MacLeod is a professor of English at the University of Windsor, Ontario. He has also taught creative writing at the University of Indiana and the Banff Centre. He lives with his wife and six children in Ontario, and still spends his summers in Cape Breton, writing in a cliff-top cabin looking west towards Prince Edward Island.

Critical Praise

"Remarkable...[MacLeod?s] writing [is] graceful and elegiac."

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Publication Date: April 3, 2001
Paperback: 304 pages
Publisher: Vintage
ISBN-10: 0375726659
ISBN-13: 9780375726651