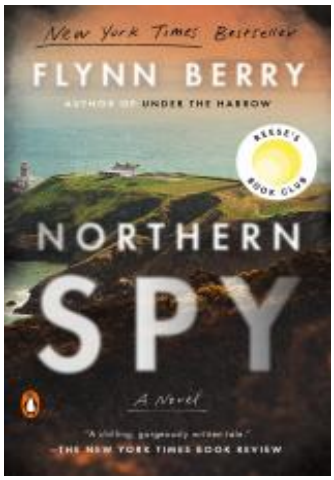
Northern Spy

by Flynn Berry



About the Book

The acclaimed author of UNDER THE HARROW and A DOUBLE LIFE returns with her most thrilling novel to date: the story of two sisters who become entangled with the IRA.

A producer at the BBC and mother to a new baby, Tessa is at work in Belfast one day when the news of another raid comes on the air. The IRA may have gone underground in the two decades since the Good Friday Agreement, but they never really went away, and lately bomb threats, security checkpoints, and helicopters floating ominously over the city have become features of everyday life. As the news reporter requests the public's help in locating those responsible for the robbery, security footage reveals Tessa's sister, Marian, pulling a black ski mask over her face.

The police believe Marian has joined the IRA, but Tessa is convinced she must have been abducted or coerced; the sisters have always opposed the violence enacted in the name of uniting Ireland. And besides, Marian is vacationing on the north coast. Tessa just spoke to her yesterday.

When the truth about Marian comes to light, Tessa is faced with impossible choices that will test the limits of her ideals, the bonds of her family, her notions of right and wrong, and her identity as a sister and a mother. Walking an increasingly perilous road, she wants nothing more than to protect the one person she loves more fiercely than her sister: her infant son, Finn.

Riveting, atmospheric and exquisitely written, NORTHERN SPY is at once a heart-pounding story of the contemporary IRA and a moving portrait of sisters and motherhood, and of life in a deeply divided society.

Discussion Guide

1. Though Tessa thinks of herself and Marian as close, she comes to realize that she has misunderstood and perhaps

underestimated her sister. What do you think is the root of Tessa?s blind spot? How did Tessa and Marian?s relationship change when Tessa left for Trinity College in Dublin? How does it evolve over the course of the novel?

2. When justifying her job at the BBC to her Catholic neighbors, Tessa often says, ?You can?t change it unless you?re in it.? Why do you think Tessa chose this line of work? Do you think she is conflicted about working for a British news organization?

3. Discuss Marian?s relationship with Seamus, Damian and Niall, and the concept of blood versus chosen families. Do you think their bond is genuine outside of their dependence on one another to accomplish their goals? Who do you think Marian is closer to? Who knows her best?

4. Do you understand what Tessa means when she observes that working with the IRA ?make[s] you feel special?? Discuss the book?s depiction of how an ?ordinary? citizen can become radicalized. Have you heard similar stories before? What do you think of the way women are strategically employed by such organizations?

5. Like many war stories, the narrative of the Troubles has been overwhelmingly male. What changes when you view a conflict through the lives of women? Did the violence affect them in different ways?

6. Tessa recalls, ?My mother was always polite to the British soldiers, even though as teenagers, two of her brothers were beaten up by soldiers.... She never shouted at the soldiers, like some women on our road did, or threw rocks at their patrols. I understand now that she was trying to protect us.? Do you think Tessa relates to her mother?s actions now that she has a child of her own and is faced with her own set of choices about how to keep him safe? How do you think the story would be different if Tessa wasn?t a mother herself? Do you see her as a good mother?

7. What do you think about the way Tessa and Marian?s mother is treated by her wealthy employers in Bangor? What are some of the other ways that social class factors into the story?

8. Tessa oscillates between being furious and frustrated with Marian, pitying her sister for how difficult her life has been and feeling guilty over her own inaction. Are you sympathetic to any of Marian?s arguments for why she went down the road she did? How do you think you would feel if you were in Tessa?s position? Would you have agreed to help her?

9. Discuss Tessa?s relationship with Eamonn. Do you think his behavior was all manipulation and performance on his part? How would you compare or contrast the tactics and morality of MI5 as depicted in the book to that of the IRA?

10. In the aftermath of the traumatic events at the safe house, Tessa copes with fatigue and homesickness, and suffers from flashbacks. Even though she is reassured that she is safe, ?the fear still spreads out, like black ink in water.? How do you think the trauma will reverberate and/or eventually settle in her life? Do you think she will ever tell Finn what took place?

11. Throughout Northern Ireland, centuries of occupation and decades of domestic terrorism have impacted those on both sides of the conflict and ordinary citizens alike. How effectively did Berry capture this reality in NORTHERN SPY? Did NORTHERN SPY make you think differently about the Troubles or give you a new perspective on the conflict that you hadn?t previously considered? Do you believe it is possible for healing and reconciliation to emerge from an entrenched conflict such as this one, that pits neighbor against neighbor and touches every corner of society?

12. How would you characterize Tessa?s transformation over the course of the novel? What do you think is next for Tessa, Marian and Finn? If there was a sequel to this book, what would you imagine might happen?

Author Bio

Flynn Berry is the author of UNDER THE HARROW, winner of the 2017 Edgar Award for Best First Novel; A DOUBLE LIFE, a *New York Times Book Review* Editors? Choice; NORTHERN SPY, a Reese?s Book Club Pick that was named one of the 10 best thrillers of 2021 by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*; and her most recent novel, TRUST HER. The recipient of a Yaddo fellowship, Berry is a graduate of the Michener Center for Writers and Brown University.

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Publication Date: April 5, 2022
Genres: Fiction, Suspense, Thriller
Paperback: 288 pages
Publisher: Penguin Books
ISBN-10: 073522501X
ISBN-13: 9780735225015