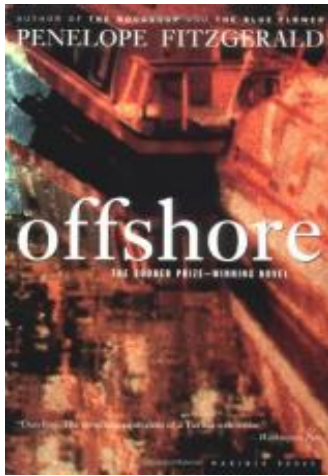


Offshore

by Penelope Fitzgerald



About the Book

On the Battersea Reach of the Thames, a mixed bag of eccentrics live in houseboats. Belonging to neither land nor sea, they belong to one another. There is Maurice, a homosexual prostitute; Richard, a buttoned-up ex-navy man; but most of all there's Nenna, the struggling mother of two wild little girls. How each of their lives complicates the others is the stuff of this perfect little novel.

Discussion Guide

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and, for every reader, provide a deeper understanding of *Offshore*.

1. What might be the significance of the title *Offshore*, other than its obvious reference to living on houseboats? In what ways may Nenna, Richard, Maurice, and Willis all be characterized as being 'offshore'? In contrast, how is life 'onshore' portrayed?
2. We learn that 'Nenna's attitude to truth was flexible and more like Willis's than Richard's.' What are Nenna's, Willis's, Richard's, and Maurice's attitudes toward the 'truth'? Do their attitudes toward the truth change?
3. There are repeated references to the ebb and flood of the river's tide. What are some examples of how these fluctuating currents mirror the story's events and the characters' lives?
4. What prevents Nenna from reuniting with Edward? In what ways might both Nenna and Edward be responsible for their living apart?
5. Fitzgerald writes that 'the barge-dwellers . . . would have liked to be more respectable than they were . . . But a certain

failure, distressing to themselves, to be like other people caused them to sink back . . . into the mud moorings of the great tideway.? How do Nenna, Maurice, Willis, and even Richard embody that ?certain failure,? and what prevents them from rectifying their situations?

6. In what ways do the names and conditions of the boats *Lord Jim*, *Grace*, *Dreadnought*, *Maurice*, and the others reflect the owners? personalities and lives?

7. Maurice says to Nenna, ?There isn?t one kind of happiness, there?s all kinds. Decision is torment for anyone with imagination.? What deters the characters from making decisions and experiencing happiness? Why might making a decision be ?torment for anyone with imagination??

8. What ironies emerge in the novel?s final scenes?

Author Bio

Penelope Fitzgerald published her first novel, **The Golden Child**, in 1977, when she was sixty years old, and since then she has published eight additional novels to increasing praise and prizes. Three of those? **The Bookshop** (1978), **The Beginning of Spring** (1988), and **The Gate of Angels** (1990)?were short-listed for the Booker Prize. She was awarded the Booker Prize for *Offshore* (1979). She has also written three biographies. Fitzgerald is now regarded as "one of the finest and most enter-taining novelists writing in England today." (*The Observer*)

Prior to her career as a novelist, Fitzgerald led a varied pro-fessional life. In addition to raising three children, she worked as journalist, in the Ministry of Food, at the BBC, and as a teacher. These experiences, as well as her travels, provided a wonderfully rich harvest of settings and characters from which she later crafted her remarkable fictions.

Among her abiding themes are the courage and determination of innocence in the face of sometimes monstrous adversity, the rewards of courageous eccentricity or creative effort, survival in terms of one's own sense of self, and the sometimes tiny sources of both grand achievement and terrible loss.

In addition to having perfected a style graced by wit, keen perception, and mastery of language, Fitzgerald has written a series of "dry, shrewd, sympathetic, and sharply economical books [that] are almost disreputably enjoyable." (*New York Times Book Review*)

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