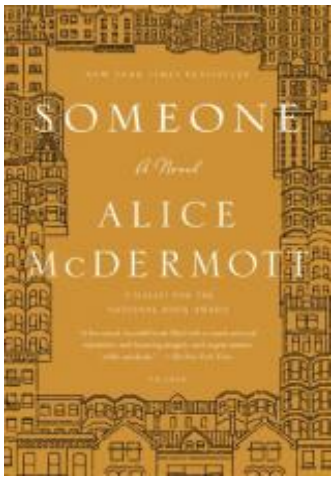
Someone

by Alice McDermott



About the Book

An ordinary life --- its sharp pains and unexpected joys, its bursts of clarity and moments of confusion --- lived by an ordinary, but unforgettable woman: this is the subject of SOMEONE, Alice McDermott?s extraordinary seventh novel.

We first glimpse Marie Commeford as a child: a girl in thick glasses observing her pre-Depression world from a Brooklyn stoop. Through her first heartbreak and eventual marriage; her delicate brother?s brief stint as a Catholic priest and his emotional breakdown; her career as a funeral director?s ?consoling angel?; the deaths of her parents and the births of her children --- we follow Marie through the changing world of the 20th century and her Irish-American enclave. Rendered with remarkable empathy and insight, SOMEONE is a novel that speaks of life as it is daily lived, with passion and heartbreak, a crowning achievement of one of the finest American writers at work today.

Discussion Guide

1. Why does the memory of Pegeen resonate so profoundly for Marie? Is there a similar story from your youth that has had a lasting effect on your life?

2. What does Marie?s mother try to teach her about becoming a fulfilled woman? What exceptional qualities does Marie?s father possess? How does their marriage shape Marie?s vision of her future?

3. Discuss the novel?s Brooklyn neighborhood as if it were a character. What are its most colorful attributes? How is it transformed over the years while Marie grows up? Do its inhabitants support one another, or is their gossip judgmental? Think about their speculation over the gender of Dora Ryan?s spouse and Bill Corrigan?s frailties.

4. Why does Marie resist her mother?s attempts to urge her to adulthood, from how to read a recipe to the importance of finding a job?

5. How is Marie able to look past the tragic death of Mrs. Hanson and focus on the loveliness of Gerty and her baby sister, Durna? Throughout her life, what beauty does Marie find in mothering?

6. What is the role of fate versus free will in SOMEONE? What did Gabe seek and find in religion? What truths about faith did he eventually learn to embrace?

7. What did Walter Hartnett ultimately get out of his time with Marie? Was she naïve to fall for him, or was he powerfully persuasive? What made Tom Commeford a good match for her?

8. What does Marie discover about life by working for Mr. Fagin?

9. Discuss the story of Margaret Tuohy. How was Marie affected by the bishop?s choice of elegant burial clothes for his sister? What did the experience show Marie about the role of the survivor?

10. As Gabe tells the story of the woman at his first parish who bought mints before attending church each week, what is revealed about the importance of avoiding assumptions? How do perceptions and misperceptions shape the novel?s storyline?

11. What is the effect of the novel?s first-person narration? As Marie narrates her life, what changes do you notice in her view of the world --- literal ones, as she endures eye surgeries, and symbolic ones?

12. Discuss Marie?s relationship with her own children. What does she do differently from her parents? What traditions does she carry on? How does McDermott capture the revelations that life and loss bring?

13. How does the depiction of Irish identity and family life in SOMEONE compare to that in similar worlds you?ve explored in other novels by Alice McDermott?

Author Bio

Alice McDermott is the author of nine novels, including CHARMING BILLY, winner of the National Book Award, and THAT NIGHT, AT WEDDINGS AND WAKES, and AFTER THIS, which were finalists for the Pulitzer Prize. She is also the author of the essay collection WHAT ABOUT THE BABY?: Some Thoughts on the Art of Fiction. Her stories and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper?s Magazine* and other publications. She lives outside Washington, DC.

Critical Praise

"In this deceptively simple tour de force, McDermott lays bare the keenly observed life of Marie Commeford, an

ordinary woman whose compromised eyesight makes her both figuratively and literally unable to see the world for what it is.... We come to feel for this unremarkable woman, whose vulnerability makes her all the more winning --- and makes her worthy of our attention. And that?s why McDermott, a three-time Pulitzer nominee, is such an exceptional writer: in her hands, an uncomplicated life becomes singularly fascinating, revealing the heart of a woman whose defeats make us ache and whose triumphs we cheer. Marie?s vision (and ours) eventually clears, and she comes to understand that what she so often failed to see lay right in front of her eyes."

? *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"One of the author?s most trenchant explorations into the heart and soul of the twentieth-century Irish-American family.... Marie?s straightforward narration is interrupted with occasional jumps back and forward in time that create both a sense of foreboding and continuity as well as a meditation on the nature of sorrow.... Marie and Gabe are compelling in their basic goodness, as is McDermott?s elegy to a vanished world."

? *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Readers who love refined, unhurried, emotionally fluent fiction will rejoice at National Book Award?winner McDermott?s return. McDermott is a master of hidden intensities, intricate textures, spiked dialogue, and sparkling wit. We first meet Marie at age seven, when she?s sitting on the stoop in her tight-knit, Irish-Catholic Brooklyn neighborhood, waiting for her father to come home from work. Down the street, boys play stickball, consulting with dapper Billy, their blind umpire, an injured WWI vet. Tragedies and scandals surge through the enclave, providing rough initiations into sex and death.... A marvel of subtle modulations, McDermott?s keenly observed, fluently humane, quietly enthralling novel of conformity and selfhood, of ?lace-curtain pretensions? as shield and camouflage, celebrates family, community, and ?the grace of a shared past.?"

? Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review)

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