

# The Heart in Winter

by Kevin Barry

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## About the Book

**Award-winning writer Kevin Barry's first novel set in America is a savagely funny and achingly romantic tale of young lovers on the lam in 1890s Montana.**

October 1891. A hard winter approaches across the Rocky Mountains. The city of Butte, Montana, is rich on copper mines and rampant with vice and debauchery among a hard-living crowd of immigrant Irish workers. Here we find Tom Rourke, a young poet and ballad-maker of the town, but also a doper, a drinker and a fearsome degenerate. Just as he feels his life is heading nowhere fast, Polly Gillespie arrives in town as the new bride of the extremely devout mine captain Long Anthony Harrington.

A thunderbolt love affair takes spark between Tom and Polly, and they strike out west on a stolen horse, moving through the badlands of Montana and Idaho, and briefly an idyll of wild romance perfects itself. But a posse of deranged Cornish gunmen are soon in hot pursuit and closing in fast. With everything to lose and the safety and anonymity of San Francisco still a distant speck on their horizon, the choices they make will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

In this love story for the ages --- lyrical, profane and propulsive --- Kevin Barry has once again demonstrated himself to be a master stylist, an unrivaled humorist, and a true poet of the human heart.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** What aspects of Tom's personality make him suspect among the authorities of Butte? How might his more artistic and mystical interests have been received if he was living in a different time period?

2. Early in the novel, Tom thinks, "The prospect of death was a glamorous comfort but it did not hold for long" (17). How is this attitude a harbinger of Tom's fate in pursuit of romantic love?
3. When Tom falls for Polly, is he struck primarily by her as a person or by the idea of being in love and married? What does Tom promise to offer Polly as an alternative to her life as the wife of Anthony Harrington?
4. Discuss the drifter characters that Tom and Polly meet on the road. How does someone like the Reverend, who warns him about the dangers of "tiny creatures in our guts...[who] want us concentrated in the body and not in the Spirit," contribute to their disconnect from the real world (89)?
5. The townspeople describe Tom as having "a kind of witchery about him" (109). What events lead them to this conclusion? What does it mean during this time for a man to be labeled with that word?
6. Discuss Anthony's self-flagellation and rant about Tom. Do you believe his rage is about losing Polly, or is it about the offense to his own masculine pride?
7. What aspects of Irish culture have become embedded in Butte? Consider the idea that "soaked in an ambience of death from the cradle, they believed themselves generally to be on the way out, and sooner rather than later, and thus could be inclined to put aside the niceties of the living realm" (116). How does Tom embody this sentiment and outlook?
8. Describe the couple's connection to their horse. Why does selling her seem like such a betrayal? How does Tom anthropomorphize the horse in his mind and behaviors?
9. How do you think the couple would have fared if Polly *hadn't* been attacked by the Jacks? Would they have been able to settle down anywhere, or were they fated to a life on the run? What does their life suggest about the feasibility of the dream of the American West prominent during this time period?
10. After the attack, the Swedish doctor says that Tom soaks up dope "like a sponge" (169). Although he'd been using drugs already, do you think his tolerance increased due to the circumstances, with both his physical and emotional pain requiring more numbing? What path might Tom have gone down if he lived in modern times?
11. How does Tom's relationship to spirituality change after he loses Polly? Consider what he expects from God when "he made himself stronger by force of belief. He spoke to God fiercely.... He slept like the dead after that. There was no more dreaming" (171).
12. How does the tone of the narrative shift once Polly's perspective takes over? Does she suffer in the same way as Tom, knowing how he was injured, and eventually dies, trying to protect her?
13. A man Tom meets on the road says, "You ain't the sort has to go lookin for trouble, are you, son?... Just kinda finds you, don't it?" (189). Does Tom welcome this aspect of his life circumstances? Does he try to avoid trouble? In the end, do you think Tom believed it was worth it to run away with Polly?
14. Polly reflects, "Anyhow the past it shifts around all the time. The past is not fixed and it is not certain and this much she has learned if nothin else. The past it changes all the while every minute you're still breathing and how in fu-- are

you supposed to make sense of it all? (242). How is the past changing for Polly? Do you think Tom will remain fixed in her memory, or has he already acquired a kind of mythology about him? What are the relief and the pain of having all of time --- past, present, future --- be unpredictable and fluid?

## Author Bio

Kevin Barry is the author of the novels *THE HEART IN WINTER*, *NIGHT BOAT TO TANGIER*, *BEATLEBONE* and *CITY OF BOHANE*, as well as three story collections, including *THAT OLD COUNTRY MUSIC*. His stories and essays have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Granta* and elsewhere. He also works as a playwright and screenwriter lives in County Sligo, Ireland.

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