The Irish Goodbye

by Heather Aimee O'Neill



About the Book

In this debut, for fans of J. Courtney Sullivan and Mary Beth Keane, three adult sisters grapple with a shared tragedy over a Thanksgiving weekend as they try to heal strained family bonds through the passage of time.

It?s been years since the three Ryan sisters were all together at their beloved family home on the eastern shore of Long Island. Two decades ago, their lives were upended by an accident on their brother Topher?s boat: A friend?s brother was killed, the resulting lawsuit nearly bankrupted their parents, and Topher spiraled into depression, eventually taking his life. Now the Ryan women are back for Thanksgiving, eager to reconnect, but each carrying a heavy secret.

The eldest, Cait, still holding guilt for the role no one knows she played in the boat accident, rekindles a flame with her high school crush: Topher?s best friend and the brother of the boy who died. Middle sister Alice has been thrown a curveball that threatens the career she?s restarting and faces a difficult decision that may doom her marriage. And the youngest, Maggie, is finally taking the risk of bringing the woman she loves home to meet her devoutly Catholic mother. Infusing everything is the grief for Topher that none of the Ryans have figured out how to carry together.

When Cait invites a guest from their shared past to Thanksgiving dinner, old tensions boil over and new truths surface, nearly overpowering the flickering light of their family bond. Far more than a family holiday will be ruined unless the sisters can find a way to forgive themselves --- and one another.

Discussion Guide

1. How does the title THE IRISH GOODBYE resonate with the novel?s themes of disappearance, avoidance and emotional distance?

2. How does the novel treat the idea of redemption? How are each of the sisters able to begin again?

3. Port Haven, the Folly and even the beach hold emotional resonance for the family. What?s the role of place in the novel?

4. How does the novel explore motherhood? From Nora?s experience growing up without a mother to Cait being a single mother and Alice?s decision around keeping her pregnancy.

5. What role does art play in the novel --- Isabel?s playwriting, Alice?s domestic stagecraft, Maggie reading ANNA KARENINA, and Nora as a painter?

6. Class and money play a role in the characters? lives, especially in Cait?s striving and Alice?s struggling. How does money shape their relationships, choices and sense of identity?

7. What is the significance of secrets in the novel? What are the costs and perceived protections of the secrets characters keep from each other?

8. How do you think the boat accident shaped the Ryan family? Is Maggie right when she says that maybe they would be who they are regardless of Daniel and Topher?s deaths?

9. What role do men play in the novel --- Topher, Kyle, Bram, Luke? How do they influence or fail the women around them?

10. Each sister plays a different role in the family: Cait, the high-achieving eldest; Alice, the reliable middle child; and Maggie, the independent youngest. How do these roles shape the way they treat each other?

11. At times, the sisters orbit one another without fully seeing each other. What are the barriers to intimacy between them? What moments allow for genuine connection?

12. Maggie describes everyone in her family using a single word. What word would you choose for her? Do you agree with the way she has described the other members of the family?

Author Bio

Heather Aimee O?Neill is a poet, a teacher, and the assistant director of the Sackett Street Writers? Workshop. She lives in Brooklyn with her wife and two sons. THE IRISH GOODBYE is her first novel.

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