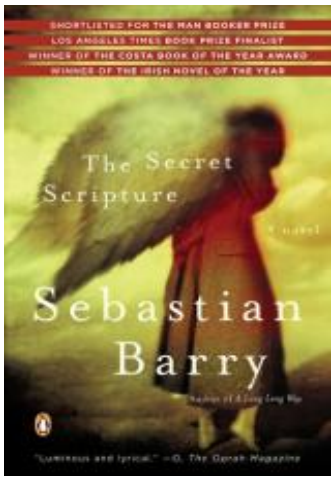
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Secret Scripture

by Sebastian Barry



About the Book

In the beginning, Dr. William Grene?s interest in the almost impossibly old woman is merely professional, tinged perhaps with a hint of curiosity. Roseanne McNulty, one hundred years old, was one of the most beautiful girls in County Sligo, Ireland, in her youth. She has been confined in the Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital, where Dr. Grene is the senior psychiatrist, since the days of World War II. Now, in compliance with a change in government policy that has decreed the closing of the hospital, Dr. Grene is evaluating the facility?s patients to make dispassionate recommendations about which ones are mentally fit to resume life in society. As he interviews Roseanne to determine her mental state his neutrality evaporates. Reluctant to cooperate but curiously compassionate toward him, the ancient woman impresses him as ?a formidable person,? and indeed she is. Cleverly, carefully, she keeps the doctor at bay, denying him access to the deepest secrets of her past.

All the while, however, Roseanne is at work on a personal narrative of the very facts she withholds from her doctor --- the ?secret scripture? of the novel?s title. Over a period of years, holding almost nothing back, she has patiently recorded the details of her preconfinement life, including her father?s ill-starred attempt to give comfort to a band of Irish rebels, a cataclysmic fire at a local orphanage, and the descent of her mother into derangement. Her narrative becomes a chronicle not only of her deep emotions, but also of a turbulent era in her nation?s history, from the upheavals of the Irish civil war to the German bombing of Belfast during World War II. It also speaks personally and poignantly of the struggles of Roseanne?s Protestant family to live a peaceful, unmolested life in the midst of religious prejudice. Slipping continually into her story is a dark and ominous specter: a Catholic priest named Father Gaunt who is committed to preserving the perceived purity of his flock and the values of his religion, even if it means destroying the lives and families of those who hold dissenting views. As Roseanne scribbles out her testament, Dr. Grene also prepares a journal, intended at first to contain his professional findings but soon expanding to contain his reflections on history, the human condition, and the failure of his relationship with his wife. Gradually, the two lonely diarists forge a bond, which, in the end, proves far closer than either could possibly have imagined.

A finalist for the 2008 Man Booker Prize and winner of the Costa Award for Best Novel, **The Secret Scripture** encompasses not only some of the most painful episodes in Irish history, but also delves deeply into the emotions of love, passion, and soul-destroying prejudice. Casting doubt upon the reliability of human perceptions and, indeed, the very nature of truth, it also upholds the possibilities of dignity and redemption.

Discussion Guide

1. Although Roseanne is very reluctant to converse with Dr. Grene about her past, she pours her recollections into her secret journal. Why do you think she is so reticent with regard to the psychiatrist and so blatant in her private revelations?

2. Do you think that **The Secret Scripture** is specifically intended as a story about Ireland and the Irish psyche, or is it a more universal story about issues that affect oppressed people everywhere?

3. The theme of woman as a sexual transgressor and outcast has long engaged writers of fiction from Hawthorne to Hardy and beyond. In what ways, if any, did **The Secret Scripture** contribute to your understanding of women who are punished for their sexual behavior?

4. Early in the novel, Joe Clear calls Father Gaunt ?a good man.? Subsequent events call this judgment gravely into question. Playing devil?s advocate, can you think of reasons for calling Father Gaunt a good man? If so, then why does his ?goodness? have such disastrous effects?

5. Father Gaunt?s account of Roseanne?s life is clouded by his prejudices. Roseanne?s autobiographical testament is rendered unreliable by her age and her suspect mental condition. Which version of events do you find more trustworthy? Is either account completely untrustworthy?

6. How does Dr. Grene?s relationship with his wife, Bet, relate to the principal plot of the novel?

7. Early in the novel, Joe Clear drops feathers and hammers from a tower in a botched attempt to explain the force of gravity to his daughter. Why do you think Barry inserts this curious vignette into the book?

8. What character names in **The Secret Scripture** do you think serve a symbolic function? What, specifically, do these names suggest?

9. Although Roseanne Clear is plainly victimized by those around her, she also makes some very poor choices, like going to meet John Lavelle on Knocknarea and seeking help from Mrs. McNulty when she is on the verge of giving birth. Is she in some strange sense complicit in her own suffering?

10. The novel explores the risks inherent in seeking truth. Have your own searches for truth sometimes had unforeseen consequences?

11. In the end, do you find Roseanne?s story tragic or triumphant? Explain.

Author Bio

Sebastian Barry was born in Dublin in 1955. The 2018?21 Laureate for Irish Fiction, he is the author of nine novels, five of which have been long- or shortlisted for the Booker Prize, most recently OLD GOD'S TIME (2023). His work has won numerous awards in Ireland, the UK and France, including the Costa Book of the Year Award, the Walter Scott Prize, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In the US, his novels have been recognized by the ALA Carnegie Medal (longlist), the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize (shortlist), and the High Plains Book Award (winner). He lives in County Wicklow, Ireland.

The Secret Scripture

by Sebastian Barry

Publication Date: April 28, 2009
Paperback: 320 pages
Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)
ISBN-10: 0143115693
ISBN-13: 9780143115694