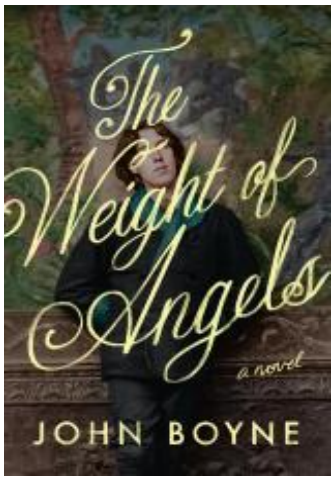
The Weight of Angels

by John Boyne



About the Book

Can one rash decision prove the difference between a life well lived and a life destroyed?

When the Marquess of Queensberry left his calling card at the Albemarle Club in February 1895, it bore only his name and five words: ?For Oscar Wilde, posing somdomite.? The most celebrated playwright of his day famously sued for libel, which led to his arrest, criminal prosecution and ultimately prison. From then on, his gilded existence spiraled into public disgrace, humiliation and an early death.

But what if he had simply ignored the insult? What direction might his life have taken? This is the premise of John Boyne?s extraordinary novel, THE WEIGHT OF ANGELS. Rather than dying in penury in Paris at age 46, what if Wilde had lived to bear witness to the momentous events and cataclysmic changes of the first part of the 20th century, and even influence some of them? What if the second half of his life was as dramatic, tumultuous and exhilarating as the first?

In imagining the life that Oscar Wilde never had, John Boyne has written one of the great what-if stories of modern literature, giving the iconic Anglo-Irish poet and playwright a fresh new voice and the opportunity to take an entirely different path.

Discussion Guide

Please Note: In order to provide book clubs with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal aspects of the book. If you have not finished reading THE WEIGHT OF ANGELS, you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. How familiar were you with Oscar Wilde?s life story before starting to read this novel?

2. In THE WEIGHT OF ANGELS, Oscar makes the decision not to sue the Marquess of Queensberry, thus changing his life?s trajectory. Do you think an entire life can turn on a single moment?

3. Oscar loves his wife, Constance, but he?s not in love with her. Do you think he treated her unfairly, or were they both victims of the times?

4. Lord Alfred Douglas --- Bosie --- has often been presented in a negative light in films and books. Did you feel any sympathy with his depiction here?

5. Various writers appear in the novel, including Bram Stoker, TS Eliot, EM Forster and Virginia Woolf. Does the author do a good job of imagining their voices?

6. Oscar Wilde was known for his witty epitaphs. Do the epitaphs that John Boyne has created feel like lines he might have said?

7. Was there an inevitability that, despite having found love and security with Gus, Oscar would behave in such a self-destructive fashion?

8. The novel returns several times to Westminster Abbey and the crowning of a new monarch. Was this a good way of marking the passing of time into new eras?

9. Several of the characters are forced to hide their homosexuality for fear of societal disapproval or even imprisonment. Is there a challenge to the reader to recognize the bigotry that remains in the world?

10. Oscar spends most of the Second World War living and working in Hollywood. How do you think he might have fared there?

11. By the end of the novel, Oscar has reached a place where he is content with his artistic contributions to the world. Did you feel he longed for 10 more years, or was he happy for his life to come to an end?

12. Are there any moral obligations on an author who reimagines the life of a real-life person?

Author Bio

John Boyne is the author of THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS, THE HEART'S INVISIBLE FURIES, A LADDER TO THE SKY, THE WEIGHT OF ANGELS, and THE ELEMENTS, which won both Le Prix Femina Étranger and the Prix du Roman Fnac in France. He lives in Dublin.

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