

Reading Club Guide

*This reading group guide for **Solace** enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Belinda McKeon**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

With his graduate thesis at a standstill, an overbearing father who wishes he would leave Dublin and return to the family farm, and a diplomatic mother trying to keep both men happy, Mark Casey has decisions to make and no idea how to make them. Faced with the conflicting desires to forge a life of his own while also embracing the life his parents have set out for him, Mark is buckling under the pressure.

As his personal life reaches a crisis point, a chance meeting with a beautiful young woman points Mark's life in a new direction. Joanne Lynch is from the same hometown as Mark and understands the constraints of familial obligation—she has a mother she doesn't speak to and a recently deceased father from whom she was estranged. When Joanne finds herself accidentally pregnant, life takes over for the young couple and Mark's relationship to his father and to questions of inheritance and responsibility grow more complicated still. But when tragedy strikes, Tom and Mark are thrown together by grief and must rediscover the meaning of family.

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This novel is full of characters and storylines that mirror one another. For example, both Mark Casey and Rupert Lefroy have sisters who have left home and rarely make contact with their families, while Elizabeth Lefroy and Tom Casey both feel rebuffed by their sons. Consider the characters and relationships in the novel that reflect each other. What are the similarities and differences that you notice in each relationship? Why do you think McKeon chose to have so many relationships reflect one another?
2. Mark and Joanne met while in a pub and much of their early courtship took place while under the influence of drugs and alcohol. How did this meeting set the stage for their relationship? What was it about Joanne that Mark found so instantly appealing?
3. If Joanne had not been in a car accident, do you think she and Mark would have stayed together? How does the following quote influence your prediction:
"Sometimes, Mark didn't really know if he and Joanne had even reached that point. Twenty months, was that enough time? To really know each other?" (p. 228)

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4. The LeFroy case comes into play early in the novel and there's that moment when Joanne interviews Antonia LeFroy and then keeps a key piece of information from her superior at the solicitor's office. What was the significance of that case and of Joanne deciding to act in this way?
5. What did you think about the way that Joanne and Maura died? Given that we are told in the beginning of the story that Joanne is no longer in the picture, were you surprised that events played out they way they did?
6. Why do you think Mark was more upset about his girlfriend's death than he did about his mother's? Do you think the bond of a couple is stronger than the bond between mother and child? Or do you think there were other factors that contributed to his reaction?
7. What do you think is the significance of Mark and Joanne not realizing the meaning of Aoife's name?
8. Clive Robinson's unexpected appearances throughout the novel always catch Joanne and Mark off guard. Think about each time Clive appears and the context of each visit. What purpose does his character serve in the story?
9. Why does Joanne underline the following sentences in Clive Robinson's book?:
"What it means to belong to a family, to a group of friends, to an organization...How is possible to say 'we'.... What is it to be truly conscious of ourselves, let alone of someone else?" (p. 187) Discuss how this theme of identification relates to the miscommunication each character faces when dealing with their family members or loved ones. What do you think the author is saying about the fundamental ways in which families operate? How do you personally define "family"?
10. When Mark brings Aoife home and runs into Gary McGrath (p. 163) he is more than proud to show off his daughter. But, when he meets Pamela Doherty moments later, he makes absolutely no mention of Aoife. Why do you think he was willing to brag about the birth of his daughter to a man and not willing to even mention her to a woman?
11. Discuss the often tense, father/son relationship between Mark and Tom. Do you think both characters were at fault or did you find yourself blaming one man more than the other? Did your opinion on their relationship change as the story progressed?
12. There are four mothers depicted in this novel: Joanne, Irene, Maura, and

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Elizabeth. How did the author depict each woman in her maternal role? Did you think some came by their duties more naturally than others? What role did Maura play in the relationship between Mark and Tom, and how did their relationship evolve once Maura passed away?

13. If Maura served as a mediator between Mark and Tom, do you think that Aoife replaced her in that capacity? What role do you think women play in this novel as familial peace keepers? Why do you think this role falls to the women in the novel? Do you find this to be true in your own family? How did you react to Antonia's unwillingness to step in and try to reconcile her mother and brother? Do you think men can also be effective in this peace keeping capacity?

14. Both Joanne and Mark have strained relations with their parents. Mark with his father and Joanne with her mother. However, just as they are in constant battle with their parents, they are also constantly thinking about them: "[Joanne] looked at him. She wanted, she realized, for him to ask about her mother, to ask what it was about her mother that bothered her so much." (p.103) Do you think it's possible to express love through rebellion? Was the constant bickering between Mark and Tom, Joanne and Irene, just another way of saying "I love you"?

15. Tom Casey spends much of the novel complaining about Mark's unwillingness to help with the farm and to conform to the life that Tom wants him to live. However, Tom had behaved similarly in his own day, preferring to shadow a neighboring farmer rather than his own father: "He had told Mark about it; how he had spent so many hours every day with Tommy, helping him out on the farm. How he had annoyed his own father, the grandfather Mark had never known, by wanting to work with Tommy rather than with him." (p.124) Do you think this kind of familial cycle can ever be broken?

16. What did you think of the supporting players like Sarah, Deirdre, Mossy, and Mona? How did they add to the overall landscape of the novel? Do you think that the author believes in non-conventional families, like those formed through friendship or through work?

17. What role did the setting of Ireland, and the changes which have taken place in Ireland over recent years, play in this story? Do you think this story could have taken place anywhere else?

18. Do you think this book has a happy ending? How do you think each of the main characters changed by the end of the book? Are they in a better place than they were

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at the beginning?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Research Maria Edgeworth and the novels she wrote. Discuss what you think the significance of Mark's fascination with Edgeworth might be when looked at in the larger context of the novel.
2. Mark's choice move away from the family farm to Dublin is one of the main points of conflict in his relationship with Tom. Discuss this theme of modernization and how it impacts family relationships. Has there ever been a time where the generation gap has played a role in how you relate to your parents or family members?
3. Visit the National Folklore Collection at the University College Dublin's website and research the origins of Aoife's name. <http://www.ucd.ie/folklore/en/>. Do you know the origins of your own name?

A CONVERSATION WITH BELINDA MCKEON

The perspective switches between characters throughout the course of the novel. Is it hard for you to keep all of the different voices straight? What kind of value do you think the multiple viewpoints added to this novel that the reader could not have gotten from following a more conventional, single narrative?

The novel takes the reader into the minds of four characters: Mark, Tom, Maura and Joanne. It wasn't difficult, in the writing, to differentiate between these voices, as each one was, for me, distinctive from very early on. Once I realized that a scene or chapter was taking place from the point of view of one character in particular, it wasn't difficult to keep that moment in the voice of that character; certainly, after a couple of years of living with these characters, this much came naturally. If there was a challenge, I suppose it was in deciding at what point it was necessary to shift from one character's voice and point of view to another; which chapter belonged to Mark, and which to Joanne; whether a scene should reach us through Maura's eyes, or through Tom's. That took a good deal of work and of trying out different perspectives. But eventually that, too, came to feel an organic process. As to the idea of a single narrative, that just wasn't something I found myself pursuing with this novel; for me, this story needed to have four distinct ways in, four distinct lives. I think ultimately that is what a point of view is, for a writer: a life. And once you realize you're in the company of more than one life, you're not going to block the others out successfully.

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So much of this novel seems to focus on the difficult aspects of human interaction and yet you chose to title the novel *Solace*. What do you think brings solace to the characters in this novel?

Well, without difficulty, there's no way of imagining solace, or of grasping what complex and unexpected forms it might take. I think that like many people, my characters find solace in places and in ways that surprise them: in situations or encounters that, imagined beforehand, might appear as dreary, awkward, painful or impoverished - but which, in the event, actually prove strangely consoling and strengthening. The title of the novel also alludes to the Irish word for light—*Solas*—as well as to the winter solstice, which unfolds so beautifully at the ancient burial chamber of Newgrange in Ireland, and which makes an appearance in the narrative.

Being born in Ireland and raised on your parents' farm, how did your background influence this story? Could you have written this story if you were still living in Ireland? Or did you need to be removed and living somewhere else in order to write it?

The farm was the first world of experience for me, and writing out of that world felt natural to an extent that actually surprised me; I realized that the atmosphere of a small farm, the routines, the language, even, were knit so deep in my consciousness that writing those passages felt, sometimes, as close to that consciousness as thought itself. As I say, this did surprise me, because it's been a long time since I was my father's helper on the farm, and I went to college in Dublin at seventeen, and anyway I've lived out of Ireland, mostly, for six years. But I suppose it was a primary experience for me, the farm, in a way that no length of time, no geographical distance, can shift. Which brings me to the second question; that of where the novel was written, and where I needed to be in order for it to be written.

I did begin this novel in Ireland; the scenes with Tom and the tractors, as well as the Christmas scenes between Tom and Mark, were written when I was living in Dublin and working as a journalist. These were both farm scenes. But I think in order to write the Dublin scenes, and to weave those in with the rural setting, I needed to be at a remove from both places. This is not new; many writers feel they need to be at a distance in order to see a familiar world through a certain filter, with a certain sharpness. That was the case for me; my apartment in Brooklyn, my local cafe, the library in Columbia, were all, for me, the perfect places in which to imagine a hayshed in Co Longford, a terraced house in Stoneybatter.

Some of your characters make extremely bad decisions throughout the course of

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this narrative. Do you ever find it difficult to portray a character that you may not particularly like? Or is that part of the fun of being a writer?

Well, firstly, a bad decision on the part of the character does not, for me, render that character unlikeable. Often - and I'm speaking both as a writer and a reader here - it actually enables me to engage with the character more closely; to empathize with them, to identify with them. Maybe that means I'm prone to bad decisions myself, I don't know. But as to the question of writing characters who are unlikeable, or who exhibit traits which are frustrating, or irritating, or just downright stupid—it's no easier or more difficult than to write characters who act in sensible, sensitive ways, who never act out of fear or cowardice or nervousness, who are fully alert to the implications of their decisions and their actions for themselves and other people.

On second thoughts, that latter category of characters must be much more difficult to write. Because I'm not entirely sure that such people exist.

Continuing along the same line, were there any characters in this book that you particularly enjoyed writing? Were there any characters that were more difficult to capture?

I think the character of Maura, Mark's mother, was the most challenging to write, not because I didn't empathize with her very deeply—I did—but because, of all the characters, she's the one with the biggest divide between her outward persona and her inner self. Maura has decided that, in order to get through life, she needs to act in certain ways and to manage things in certain ways, and the way that she thinks and speaks to herself is at quite a remove from that public side. The other characters either don't try or don't succeed, I think, to create such a front.

A large portion of the text revolves around the academic world and what it can be like to participate in that world on a professional level. Is that something that you felt a strong need to comment on? Why did you choose to set one of your main characters in the world of academia?

Giving Mark an identity as a PhD student didn't arise out of a desire to comment on the world of academia; like other aspects of his character and his story, it arrived in a far less self-conscious way than that. Mark was working in IT when I first dreamed him up, but somewhere along the line, quite early, it became clear to me that he was, rather, a student, and a student in his twenties, and a student who was struggling to get through this thing, this thesis, he had taken upon himself in a fit of enthusiasm some years before. And academia, I realized, was the world with which Mark was trying to

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replace his own primary world of the farm. I suppose it presented itself to me as right for Mark, this world, because of the way, in its intensity, its difficulty and its potential for isolation, it can magnify and force a confrontation with many of the very things that a character like Mark might be trying to escape.

Now that you've finished this novel, what's next?

Another novel! It's at an early stage. I think it's likely that it'll be set between Ireland and New York, so it will be interesting to see how that question of being at a distance from a place while writing about it plays into the process this time around. I'm also working on other things; a play, a short screenplay and various essays. And I'd like to write more short stories.

Did a great deal of research go into the writing of this novel? Could you describe your process when working on a project? Which parts of the writing process do you most enjoy and which parts did you find the most difficult?

The only parts of the story which required any real research were the sections dealing with Joanne's duties as a legal trainee. There was also some light research into farm machinery; there may have been a couple of evenings poring over the intricacies of new tractors on manufacturer websites! I re-read Edgeworth, and had a look at some of the recent scholarship on her; I also re-read Marilyn Butler's excellent biography of Edgeworth, which helped not just with the sections of the novel where Mark reflects on his thesis topic, but, I think, with the novel overall.

As for my process: it's one of immersion in the worlds as they develop—and sometimes it's just a process of wishing for that kind of immersion. Because it takes a while. I write longhand as often as possible, and I find that I know when it's time to switch to the computer, or when a certain scene or, maybe, section of dialogue, requires the more rapid-fire approach of typing. I try to write every day. Something falls off in the momentum and in that experience of immersion otherwise. But notice that I say I *try* to write every day.

What part of the process do I prefer? Like most writers, I love and dream of the moment when it flows. I dread and yet know that I have to endure, and mostly experience, the crawl and chaos of the rest of it.

Has writing this book changed your opinions on what it means to be a parent and what it means to be a child?

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I think it's rather that the writing of those relationships was shaped by the way my perspectives on those things changed during the years I wrote the novel. I don't actually know what it feels like to be a parent, of course; I'm not a parent. But life has handed me plenty of reasons, over the past six years, to think about the complications of both sides of the parent-child coin.

Do you still think about these characters from time to time? If you do, where do you think they are now? Do you think Mark and Tom may have finally learned how to be happy?

I have to confess I don't think about them like that—they live within the world of the novel for me. But I also love the idea of the characters having an ongoing life in the minds of readers. And in a sense, every time these characters meet a new reader, that ongoing life acquires another layer.

Mark's thesis is on Maria Edgeworth and the novel itself is set in Edgeworth—a village named after this 19th century novelist. What is the significance of choosing to feature Edgeworth as both the focus of Mark's academic frustrations and as the locale for your novel? Who are some of your other influences?

I like to think that Maria Edgeworth demanded to be Mark's thesis topic. She made her way into the narrative in a pretty determined fashion, I have to say; the scene is no longer there, but there was a moment when Mark and Joanne were driving down from the city to Dorvaragh, and Mark suddenly took a right turn and drove up to the old Edgeworth manor house to show the place to Joanne. That—and it was a surprise to me, too—was when I realized that Edgeworth was his thesis topic, and it made absolute sense to me. Having grown up in Co. Longford, where Edgeworth lived most of her life, I've always been aware of her, but I've never really thought about her that much. This novel was partly my way of doing that. And I also discovered that, in terms of the kind of novel it was turning out to be, in terms of the kinds of meditations on truth-telling and realism and responsibility to your own place that are, for me, at the core of the novel, the presence of Edgeworth, again, made sense. Plus, once I went back to the Butler biography of Edgeworth, I kept discovering all these interesting moments of serendipity between her life and Mark's story.

Essentially, Edgeworth showed up in this novel, and I had a lot of fun welcoming her in. As for other influences, they're wide-ranging and hard to explain.

In addition to writing this novel, you are also an award-winning playwright. What made you decide to write a novel? How was this experience different from

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writing a play?

I didn't decide to write a novel in that conscious way; it wasn't as though I'd been writing plays for a while and then decided to tackle a novel. Writing fiction has been centrally important for me since the age of eight or nine; I'd started other novels, but this one stuck. And the process is different to writing a play—the experience of being fully in the consciousness of a character is different, and the structural constraints and freedoms are different. But it's all about sitting down and actually doing the thing, whatever it is you're writing.