

Reader's Guide

In the Company of Others

1. Ireland is itself a character in the novel, noted throughout the book for the beauty of its landscape, and for the intensity of emotion in its history and people. Liam captures this perfectly when he quotes the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: 'By suffering worn and weary, but beautiful as some fair angel yet' (p. 37). Which characters best embody this quotation? Think of the multiple ways in which beauty can manifest itself.
2. Karon has filled the novel with excerpts of poetry and prose; these quotations are included not only for their beauty but for the way they capture the meaning of the scenes that contain them. Locate the quotation that you found most affecting; explain why it moved you, and why it was integral to the passage in which it appears.
3. Swans are powerful metaphors in the novel. What do they represent for Tim? At what points in the narrative are they mentioned? What do you think is the significance of the scene on p. 373 when Tim sees a flock of swans flying overhead?
4. Have you been to Ireland? If so, does the author's depiction of the landscape and the people match your experience? Why or why not? If you've not been to Ireland, how does this story affect the likelihood that you'd visit?
5. The novel is not written in the first person, but we very much follow the novel from Tim's perspective, knowing his interpretations and private responses to the book's events. How does this form of storytelling create the sense that Tim is confiding in the reader? What does the reader know of Tim's feelings that the other characters do not?
6. Tim asks his Irish friends to call him Tim rather than Reverend, but they resist. Why is this? What authority does his title convey? Does maintaining this formality make it easier for the characters to confide in him?

7. Tim considers Ireland's lush green landscape as 'composed of more, he reckoned, than a plenitude of moisture—something supernatural was ever rising from the core of this ancient land carved by glaciers' (p. 68). What is the supernal force he is referring to?
8. Dr. O'Donnell's journal captivates Cynthia and Father Tim. What are particular aspects of the story that speak to them? What are some similarities between the lives of the people who lived in 1860s Ireland and those we encounter in parts of the book set today? What are differences?
9. What are the advantages to having readers experience Dr. O'Donnell's journal in the doctor's own words rather than it being related by one of the modern-day characters?