

Charming Billy Study Guide

Charming Billy by Alice McDermott

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Plot Summary

Charming Billy by Alice McDermott is the story of Billy Lynch and the family and friends that surround him. The novel begins at a small bar in the Bronx after Billy's funeral where his family has gathered. Stories are told about Billy, of his first love and his wife, and of his struggles with alcoholism. A debate begins regarding the cause of Billy's alcoholism. Some believe it is a disease and no matter what happened in his life Billy would still have become an alcoholic. Others believe it was the loss of his first love, an Irish girl named Eva, which drove Billy to drink himself to death. However, his cousin Dennis knows better.

Dennis told Billy his love had died to spare him the truth. Eva decided to marry her childhood sweetheart and took the money Billy sent her to come to the States to buy a small gas station for her husband to run. Dennis thought he was doing Billy a favor at the time.

Dennis and Billy meet Eva and her sister, Mary, on the beach in a small bay not too far from a house Dennis's stepfather owns. It is love at first sight for Billy. Billy gives Eva a ring and promises to bring her and her family to the States since this is what she wants. Dennis eventually borrows the money Billy needs to bring Eva to the States from his stepfather and arranges for Billy to work in the stepfather's shoe store to pay off the loan. After the news of Eva's supposed death, Billy continues to work at the store and this is where he meets his wife, Maeve.

The night after the funeral, Maeve is upstairs napping while Billy's family is in her living room discussing old family gossip. Dennis comes to the house and immediately takes the dog out for a walk. When he returns, Maeve is convinced it is Billy's voice coming up the stairs to her. Maeve rushes down the stairs only to find Billy is still gone. It is only the Monsignor from her local church who can calm Maeve after this episode.

After the reception at Maeve's house, Dennis and his daughter drive another cousin, Dan Lynch, home. Dan Lynch is an old bachelor who is also a romantic. Dan believes that Billy was a drunk because of Eva, the dead Irish girl. Dan believes if it had not been for Eva, Billy would have married and had a dozen children and been a happy man. As it was, Dan believes Billy never really loved Maeve and only married her to have someone to take care of him.

Billy, however, did find out that Eva was not dead. Thirty years after he met her, Billy travels to Ireland to take a pledge to stop drinking. While there, he decides to go see Eva's grave. Lost in the little town where she grew up, Billy stops at a gas station to get directions. It is at this gas station that he finds Eva, older and rounder now, happily alive. Billy returns to the Long Island house for the first time since he received news of her death and speaks to Dennis about his deception; he is not angry but resolved.

Dennis has suffered from the lie he told Billy. He too finds himself wondering if Billy's life might have been different had he not lied to him. Billy is romantic, full of poetry no one

else really understands. Dennis tells himself it is this idyllic view of the world that has driven Billy to drink, not his own lie. However, when Dennis's wife, Claire, dies, he finds himself struggling with a complete loss of faith. It is only in his friendship and later romantic interest in Billy's widow, Maeve, that Dennis finally finds his faith again.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

After the funeral for her husband Billy, Maeve Lynch arranges for forty or so family members to meet at a bar for the reception. It is a small bar in the Bronx that no one has ever heard of and where they have laid out a long table to sit all forty for lunch and drinks if they want. Most of the family members find it a comfortable place for a funeral reception, though many do not miss the irony of having the funeral reception for a man who died of alcohol poisoning in a bar. Dennis, a cousin of Billy's, sits next to Maeve and deals with the waiters, the owner, and will settle the bill at the end of the afternoon.

Billy's sisters sit at the opposite end of the table from Maeve and a conversation begins about Billy, and what a good man he was. Billy had a great nature someone says. Someone else mentions how hard he worked. Then someone mentions the Irish girl. The Irish girl was beautiful. Her name was Eva and it was such a blow to Billy to lose her. They wonder if when he went to Ireland to take the pledge, to quit drinking again, if he went to her grave. Bridie, a neighbor lady, pulls out a note Billy sent her while he was in Ireland, just a few words on a napkin. Billy was always doing things like that, sending notes on anything that was handy. The napkin is passed around the table and everyone smiles at the memory of similar notes they all received from Billy at one point or another.

Eva died of pneumonia, Billy's sister Kate recalls. Dennis got the call and took Billy out to the house on Long Island to tell him. It was at that house where Billy met Eva in the first place. Billy went back there after Ireland, in 1975, Mickey Quinn recalls. It must have been Billy's way of moving past the memory of her.

Billy worked at a shoe store after the war, Rosemary, another sister, recalls. Billy worked there along with his job at Con Ed to make extra money to send for Eva so she could come back to America and marry him. It was there, too, where he met Maeve. Maeve would come in nearly every week to buy shoes for her father, who was an alcoholic and would lose his shoes at whatever bar he spent the night before in. She is not a beautiful woman, but a woman of strength. Billy saw that in Maeve. They were married for more than thirty years.

It must have been tough for Maeve, her father an alcoholic and Billy, too, Dan Lynch says. It's a disease, Rosemary says. That is why Billy was never able to quit drinking even though he joined AA so many times and made that pledge in Ireland. No, Dan Lynch says. No, Billy drank because he was so heartbroken over losing Eva. Dennis's daughter tells him this when they get in the car to go home. Dennis says that the thing is Eva never actually died.



Chapter 1 Analysis

Irony abounds in this first chapter. The story opens with a funeral reception in a bar. However, it turns out the deceased gentleman died of acute alcohol poisoning as a result of years of alcoholism. It seems the choice of a bar is ironic, but perhaps to some of the characters it is appropriate to celebrate the life of this man who spent so much time in bars. It is also ironic that his wife of thirty years is at the head of the table, opposite to the gossipers at the other end, and yet it is another woman in Billy's life that dominates the conversation. Here is this woman, Maeve, who took care of Billy in the worst moments of his life and grieves as only his widow can, and yet the people closest to Billy assume his heart, and the cause of his self-destructive behavior, lay with another woman.

There is foreshadowing in this chapter as well. At the end when Dennis announces that this great romantic figure in Billy's life, the dead Irish girl, never actually died, is foreshadowing. Curiosity alone will propel the reader into the next chapter just to know what he meant by that. There are also a lot of doors into Billy's life that have been opened in this chapter that wait to be explored.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Dennis tells his daughter how Eva's sister, Mary, came to him one night and showed him a letter Eva wrote to her. It seems Eva married a childhood friend and used the money Billy sent her to come to America to buy a small gas station in their hometown. Dennis is devastated by this news, aware of how much Billy loves Eva. Mary jokes that perhaps Dennis should tell Billy Eva was dead. To her she was.

Dennis takes Mary home and goes to his stepfather to offer to check for storm damage at his Long Island home. His stepfather, Mr. Holtzman, hands Dennis the keys only after he promises to take Billy with him. Dennis collects Billy with the same cover story and drives out to Long Island, the whole time trying to figure out how best to tell Billy about Eva. Dennis struggles with the truth, aware of all the people who would have to find out after Billy and how difficult it would be for him. Somehow Dennis cannot tell him the truth and the lie about pneumonia slips out. Dennis knows it is wrong, knows he will have to add lie to lie, but he wants to protect his cousin.

When the story is done, Dennis's daughter asks if Billy ever learned the truth. Billy ran into Eva when he went to Ireland in 1975, he tells her. However, neither Billy nor Dennis ever tells anyone else, not even their wives.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In this chapter there is the beginning of insight into the man Billy was. It touches on the theme of love when Dennis describes how deeply Billy loved this Irish girl who obviously did not return his affections. This chapter also lends credence to the idea that Billy died not from alcoholism but an old broken heart. This again is part of the theme of love as well as foreshadowing into the following chapters. It is also ironic to think that Billy eventually learns the truth, if this is the reason for his alcoholism. The reader must wonder if Billy knew the truth, why then did he continue to drink if that truly was his reason to drink.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The Long Island house belongs to Dennis, willed to him after his mother died. Dennis had long believed that his mother sold her husband's house after his death, however she only arranged a year round tenant and left it alone. In the last few months before her death, Dennis's mother rewrote her will and left everything but the house to charity. Dennis had not expected anything from his mother's passing.

Dennis and his daughter are at the Long Island house in 1975 when Billy returns from Ireland. Dennis's wife had died in 1973 of cancer. Dennis has become a creature of habit, keeping life simple to help him deal with the grief. His daughter is visiting from college that day. Dennis has arranged for his year-round tenant to allow them access to the house for two weeks, something he does every summer.

They pick Billy up at the train station and go to a local restaurant for lunch. Dennis's daughter remembers how outgoing Billy was, teasing with the waitress and telling long-winded stories to some of the other customers about the summer he spent on the island. It is at this lunch when Billy tells Dennis he ran into Eva in Ireland, though Dennis's daughter does not know who they are talking about at the time. After lunch, Dennis and his daughter take Billy on a tour of the island and he remarks how much it has changed after all these years.

Back at the house, Dennis's daughter goes for a swim at the bay, much like Dennis and Billy did all those years ago when they met Eva and Mary. On her way home from the bay, her father's tenant's son Matt comes along in his car and offers her a ride. They talk for a while and she agrees to a date that night. At home, Dennis and Billy are whispering conspiratorially together and Billy is already quite drunk.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Foreshadowing is clear in this chapter as the narrator talks about an event that seems out of order from the rest of the story. Billy comes home from Ireland to let Dennis know he knows the truth. It is ironic Dennis is Billy's first stop, since it is Dennis who perpetrated this fraud on him. However, Billy does not show much anger at Dennis's deception.

More foreshadowing abounds in the meeting between Dennis's daughter and Matt. Dennis's daughter talks about Matt as though she knows him well, calling him and talking with great affection for that first meeting. How ironic, she says, that it would be him and not one of his brothers who came upon her that day. It is clear there will be more about Matt in later chapters.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In July 1945, Dennis and Billy return from the war. They plan on going back to their jobs at Con Ed, but for now they are on a sort of hiatus, time between what their lives used to be and what they are now. Dennis and Billy agree to fix up Mr. Holtzman's house on Long Island for him. Once there, they quickly fall into a routine and enjoy the physical labor of fixing up the long neglected house.

One day, just like every other day, the boys go down to the bay for a quick swim after their day's work. This day, however, there are children on the small beach and two girls watching over them. The boys are too shy to speak to them. The girls and their seven little charges are there the next day. This time Billy and Dennis get up the nerve to talk to the children. One of the girls comes over and joins in. They are from Ireland, it turns out, the thinner girl working as a nanny to a rich couple from New York and the other girl is her sister there for a visit.

Billy is immediately infatuated with the rounder girl. He helps her with the baby she is caring for and strikes up a conversation, forever smitten with the sound of her voice. After that afternoon, the girls are always there when the boys walk to the bay. Soon they find themselves quitting work earlier and staying at the beach longer. Finally, they ask the girls, Eva and Mary, out on a date. Their employer says it is okay if they put the children to bed first.

When the boys arrive, however, one child is still awake. Billy charms her with his smile and his poetry and the girl goes quickly off to bed. The foursome first goes to a bar where a friend told them they would get good service, only to watch the bartender ignore a customer simply because he is Jewish. They leave there and go to the beach where Billy and Eva flirt and talk about the future. Billy promises he will pay for her to come back to America after she returns to her family and he will also pay for her family to come over. Dennis and Mary wander off for some time alone.

A few weeks later, Holtzman and Dennis's mother come for a visit and to check on their progress. At the beach, Billy cannot help but talk about Eva despite Dennis's warnings. Sheila Holtzman is a dream killer, Dennis thinks. She would do everything she could to ruin Billy's infatuation. Billy wrongly believes Dennis's concern is due to his own immoral actions with Mary rather than Billy's own infatuation.

Chapter 4 Analysis

There is a closure of some foreshadowing from the previous chapters. Now the reader knows how Billy and Dennis met Eva and Mary, and the reader also sees Billy promise to send for the girl, a fact that has been established in earlier chapters. Billy's deep love

for this girl is symbolic of the times they live in and the experiences the war has shown him.

This chapter also opens up new foreshadowing in the way Dennis reacts to his mother and the idea of her becoming aware of Eva. She's a dream killer, Dennis says. Already Dennis is fiercely protective of Billy's infatuation, a fact the reader will note again in later chapters.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Dennis's mother always irons her husband's shirts first. Her new husband and the house he gave her are a priority to Sheila Holtzman. Dennis knows this is because she felt unwanted from the time she was a child, unwanted and in the way. When she married Dennis's father, she thought she would finally have a home of her own, but Daniel's benevolent nature made that impossible. Only now, married to a shoe store owner, does she finally have all she ever wanted.

Sheila was living with an aunt and uncle when she met Daniel. She had been passed from relative to relative since her parents died several years before, always in the way, always another mouth to feed. Her uncle got her a job working in a bakery so she could continue going to school, which was her parent's wish. Unfortunately the baker was a drunk and a leech, and Sheila never knew when he might try to corner her and force his attentions on her. Sheila finally quit school and the bakery, instead taking a job in the city in the mailroom of a gas company.

In order to get to work, Sheila had to take a certain trolley every morning. The conductor is a ruddy-faced Irish-man who has a story for every passenger. Daniel would constantly tease his passengers and regale them with stories about a man named Paddy, who some days was his cousin, others his brother, and still others an uncle. The only thing that could stop Daniel's constant chatter was the sight of Sheila. It became a game with the passengers to see if he would ever get up the nerve to ask her out.

Sheila comes home from work months later to find the owners of the bakery in her aunt and uncle's living room. The uncle and aunt's son is returning from the war soon and will need his bedroom back. However, the bakery owners' have a spare room and they will need help with a new baby on the way. It is the very next day that Sheila speaks to Daniel. The morning after their wedding, Sheila comes out of the bedroom to find several dirty men bed down in her living room. When she asks Daniel who they are, he tells her they are Paddy.

Billy and Dennis go back to their jobs at Con Ed, Billy completely involved in his scam to get Eva back to the states so he can marry her. Dennis is still dating Mary. Most of their friends are married or getting married and Billy has found solace in going to church as often as possible. Dennis, however, is losing interest in Mary and has begun a flirtation with an engaged girl at work named Claire Donovan.

Dennis receives a bribe from a customer to speed up the repair of his electricity and takes the money to Billy for his Eva fund. Dennis believes that as long as Billy is happy and planning his future that everyone can eventually find happiness. Dennis desperately wants to see Billy succeed. Therefore, Dennis goes to Mr. Holtzman and asks to borrow



five hundred dollars with the understanding that Billy will work in the store two days a week to pay it back.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Dennis's mother is a complicated woman who has had a tough life, as many people of her generation have. Her story touches on the theme of family, not so much the company of a family but the lack of one. Not until she marries Daniel does Sheila find a family, however they quickly become overwhelming to her and she does not want them. It is ironic that a woman who has searched for a place to belong her whole life would shun the only family who ever truly wants her.

There is also foreshadowing in this chapter. Dennis has continued to date Mary, however, it is clear from an earlier chapter that he stops seeing her after she tells him of Eva's deception. Dennis has already met a woman he loves to flirt with, however, which is where the foreshadowing comes in this chapter.

This chapter also touches on the theme of family again at the end when Dennis asks Mr. Holtzman for the money Billy needs to bring Eva to the States. Only a man who understands the importance of family would put himself out on such a limb.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Billy sends the money to Eva and then requests her shoe size so he can send her and her sisters some shoes. Eva responds immediately with tracings of their feet. The same day Billy picks out the shoes for Eva and her sisters, a young woman comes in with her drunken father to buy him some shoes. She comes back a few times that summer, once again with her father and once with a girlfriend. Billy is charming to them, but really does not notice either.

The same day Billy goes to Long Island with Dennis and learns that Eva died, the young woman comes to the store again, alone this time. It is clear to Smitty, Holtzman's assistant, that she has a crush on Billy, but Billy probably is not be ready to notice it for quite some time. Smitty feels sorry for the poor girl. The girl, Maeve, returns to the store the following January with her father. Billy makes friends with the old man, perhaps sensing a kindred spirit. The man had lost his oldest daughter to lead poisoning and his wife some years later. He was a police officer who took a desk job for the sake of his only living child. It is believed for a long time that Maeve will become a nun because she has such a close relationship with the nun's at her school. However, Maeve remains in her home to take care of her father when alcoholism begins to take over his life.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This short chapter introduces the character of Maeve in more depth than in the first chapter. There is foreshadowing in her attempts to see Billy and in Billy's new friendship with her father. The reader must wonder how they will go from a shy young woman and a heartbroken young man into a married couple.

This chapter also touches on the theme of love. Here the reader sees Billy's devotion to Eva and his devastation at her loss, and the reader is also introduced to Maeve's infatuation with Billy. It is ironic that Billy is grieving over a woman who never really wanted him while a woman who does is left unseen just under his nose.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The evening of Billy's funeral, friends and family gather in Maeve's living room. His sisters, Kate and Rosemary, are there, the next door neighbors, Dan Lynch, two Legion of Mary ladies, and Dennis and his daughter. Dennis takes the dog for a walk the moment he comes in, his thoughts full of memories of Billy and of Billy calling him just after he's taken the dog for a walk.

Relatives in the living room talk about another funeral, that of Daniel Lynch, when a friend of the family begins to sing "Danny Boy." They talk about Daniel's wife, Sheila, and her second husband, Mr. Holtzman, which brings them to the shoe store where Billy and Maeve met. Dennis comes in with the dog and gives her a biscuit, quietly assuring her of what a good dog she is. This is when Maeve rushes down the stairs. She has heard Dennis's voice from her bedroom where she had been napping and thinks it is Billy.

Rosemary and Kate instantly move to console Maeve. Maeve is so upset she becomes sick and Kate has to take her upstairs to help her clean up. The ladies discuss what made Maeve sick, and that she should have eaten something rather than drink sherry on an empty stomach. A few moments later, the monsignor from Maeve's church arrives. Dennis's daughter is sent upstairs to tell Maeve and finds Kate alone in Maeve and Billy's room. There is a postcard stuck in the mirror that Billy sent Maeve from the Long Island house after his trip to Ireland.

Downstairs the monsignor quickly calms Maeve, reassuring her that death is not the end for Billy. It is clear to all the people in the room that this man knows how to deal with this sort of thing and they are all quietly relieved to have him there. Maeve herself is greatly relieved by his words and begins to get herself under control.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This is the first chapter where the reader really sees the depth of Maeve's love and grief for her husband. This touches on the theme of love, the different facets of love that people experience in their individual lives. First there are the family members, all grieving in their own ways over Billy. Then there is Maeve, who grieves for Billy much the way Billy himself grieved for Eva. It is ironic how many connections there are between Billy's feelings for Eva and Maeve's feelings for him.

The theme of family again appears here. The family has gathered, each member taking care of the others. This is what family is supposed to do, until the narrator steps back and you see the individuals beyond their familial roles.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The first time Billy goes to dinner at Maeve's, she spills the spinach on the floor and feeds it to him and her father anyway. Billy asks her to a movie after dinner and her father tells her it is only obligation that makes him do it. Maeve prays for the best and expects the worse after their first date. She tells those gathered at her home that night of the early days of their courting. Maeve admits to throwing her father's shoes down the incinerator more than once to have an excuse to go to the shoe store just to see Billy. The second time is after their first date. Maeve wants to see Billy and is rewarded when he asks for a second date.

Maeve then goes on to tell the story of the day Billy died. He does not come home all that night, however, that has happened before. Maeve, though, has a bad feeling this time. She calls her neighbor and asks her to come sit with her. By morning, there is still no word. Maeve sends her friend home and is going about her normal morning routine when the phone rings. It is the VA hospital. Someone has found Billy in the street and brought him there. Maeve calls Dennis and asks him to go see if it really is Billy.

After eating the various casseroles friends and neighbors have brought, Maeve's guests begin to leave. The neighbors leave first, assuring Maeve that if she ever needs anything they will be there for her. The legion ladies go next, promising to be back the next day, then Rosemary and her husband. Dan Lynch and Dennis and his daughter are the last to leave, and Kate stays to help Maeve through the night. Dennis gives Dan Lynch a ride home and is forced to listen to him philosophically discuss his opinions about death and religion.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Foreshadowing from previous chapters is satisfied with this chapter. The reader finally sees a glimpse into the relationship Maeve and Billy shared. First there are the sweet memories, the days before Billy's drinking gets out of control and he is still sweet and caring, then the memory of the day he died, a moment that was expected but still hard to experience. There is more foreshadowing in Maeve's request that Dennis be the one to identify the body.

The reader is also treated to more on the theme of love in this chapter. Not only is there the love growing, for Maeve at least, between Maeve and Billy, but there is the open love between Maeve and Billy's family and friends. Maeve may have been a plain woman, but she has a lot of love and family in her life, another theme of the novel.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Dan Lynch insists that Dennis and his daughter come upstairs for a nightcap. In his apartment, Dan is once again philosophical about Maeve and Billy. He talks about Eva and Maeve, about the first time he saw Billy with Maeve. No one believed Billy would ever marry after Eva died; however, Maeve clearly won his loyalty, if not his heart. Dan talks about Maeve's father, about how he constantly reminded Maeve that there had been another in Billy's life before her. Also it was Maeve's father who was Billy's first drinking buddy. Billy would drink with the man for hours, who would talk about his dead wife and dead child, and Billy would help him to bed when he was too drunk to do it alone, much like Dennis did for Billy in later years.

Maeve would always help Dennis carry Billy upstairs in those later years, receiving bruises to her thighs and wrists for the trouble. Afterward, she would often offer Dennis a piece of cake and some tea and regale him with stories of her past. It was a routine for the three of them, until Claire became sick and Dennis spent so much of his time at the hospital with her. It was then that Billy would often become violent toward Maeve.

Dan Lynch is convinced Billy's life would have been much different if Eva had not died. Had Billy married Eva, if he had had the children he so desperately wanted, if he had had the life he wanted, he would not have turned to the alcohol that eventually killed him. It is clear to his daughter that Dennis wants to tell him it was all a lie. However, that is something Dennis will never do.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Again, foreshadowing has come full circle in this chapter. Dan Lynch talks about the first time he saw Maeve and Billy together, which fulfills questions asked in earlier chapters regarding their relationship. However, it also opens more foreshadowing questions when Dan Lynch wonders aloud if Maeve would know what to do with a man who truly loved her. It is ironic that Maeve's father was an alcoholic as well as her husband, almost as if Billy sought her out on purpose so that he would not have to die alone.

There is also a touch on the theme of faith in this chapter. Dennis is clearly tempted to tell Dan Lynch that Eva did not die, to dispel any more belief that Billy died grieving for a girl who did not love him. However, Dennis refuses to tell him and the narrator suggests it is because he is still protecting what little bit of romance there is left there. Perhaps it is his faith in the idea of Billy's dream that keeps him from talking of it, from ruining the magic of the dream. This is ironic, of course, because the dream is all based on a fraud.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The day Billy dies, Dennis goes to identify the body and then to Maeve's to help her deal with the funeral arrangements. After everyone is notified, Dennis goes back to work because he does not know what else to do. On a call that afternoon, he goes to a black church and deals with a reverend who clearly believes Dennis to be a bigot. When Dennis goes to leave, the man slips him ten dollars to ensure the work gets done sooner. Dennis drops the money on the ground.

The episode reminds him of a time some ten years earlier when he learns that he will not get a promotion he wanted because the man who bribed him back in the late forties wrote a letter to his superiors and it is still in his personnel file. Dennis is not happy about this, but resigns himself to the idea. That same night, Billy calls and talks about Eva. The injustice of it, the loss of everything she had yet to do, caused Billy to lose his faith. Dennis struggles with this fact and the fact that it is based on a lie he told.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Dennis being given a bribe on the same day Billy dies is a parallel of another bribe he was given back when Billy was still saving money to bring Eva to him. This new bribe is symbolic of all the dreams that have died with Billy, including Dennis's own dreams of a bright future and more than just a wife, kids, and a house to show his success.

When Billy calls Dennis the same night he loses his promotion and begins lamenting Eva's young death, Dennis struggles with his sense of faith. Dennis has always had faith in Billy's dream, a dream that is innocent and symbolic of everything good they as young men had hoped for in their futures. Dennis is a middle-aged man now with a wife and children, yet a part of him still wants to cling to the faith of Billy's dream.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Dennis loses his faith when his wife dies. Everyone tells him to cry, that it is okay; everyone except his kids. Dennis's kids allowed him to grieve the way he wanted to, all of them eventually leaving him on his own to go live their own lives. Dennis's daughter asks him if he still struggles with his faith the night Billy is buried. Dennis tells her he believes everything now. His daughter is not sure whether or not he is lying.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This short chapter underscores the theme of family and the differences between the family of Dennis's generation and that of his daughter's generation. Dennis's aunts and uncles rallied around whenever a spouse would die, ready to do what it takes to help the widower through the lonely days ahead. Dennis's own children, however, run away and allow him to grieve the way he wants. In Maeve's day, it was expected she would stay with her father and care for him in his old age, in Dennis's daughter's time, she cannot leave home quickly enough.

This chapter also touches on theme of faith. Dennis struggles with his faith throughout the book, especially in the years after his wife's death and during Billy's decline. However, Dennis assures his daughter that finally he understands. Even his daughter questions if he speaks the truth.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Billy rents a car in Ireland, intent on going to Eva's parents and speaking with them before going to Eva's grave in 1973. Billy gets lost on the way and stops at a little gas station just outside the little town where Eva grew up. The whole drive, he thinks of everything Eva missed out on, the children she never had, the marriage she never had, the life she never had. At the gas station, the owner sends him into a tiny diner attached to it and tells him to ask his wife for directions. The wife turns out to be Eva.

Billy and Eva talk for a while. Eva feels guilty for not returning his money to him. However, she has a good life, has had four children, and now has grandkids. Mary never married, she tells him, and she never forgave Eva for her deception. Back in Long Island, Billy asks Dennis about the lie he told. Billy does not seem angry, only resigned. Billy is also drunk.

That night, Dennis's daughter goes out to a movie with Matt, the tenant's son. They talk about the little house and how they both slept in the same room, she when her family spent the summer there and he when he visited his father during the years he was a tenant there. Eventually Matt's parents get back together, saying they had a few problems, nothing big, never mind that they were separated during Matt's entire childhood. Dennis's daughter figures their meeting and falling in love is some sort of redemption for the Long Island house.

The next day, Dennis makes Billy leave the house early because of his drinking. Dennis's daughter watches Billy write out a post card for Maeve over breakfast. It is the same one Maeve keeps stuck in her dresser mirror. Beautiful friend, he writes.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Finally the reader gets to see Billy find Eva. There is irony in the simple way in which he finds her after all those years of grieving for her and humility in the idea of the deception that has been played on him. Would Billy have been an alcoholic if not for Eva's death? There is no clear answer, though the sight of her does send him back into the bottle despite his pledge. This touches on the theme of love.

The postcard Billy sends Maeve after he sees Eva is symbolic of their entire relationship. After all Maeve has done for Billy, friend is all he can say to her despite knowing his grief is all for nothing. Maeve keeps the card for years, happy to have even this little piece of her husband. This touches on the theme of love and the theme of faith.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The morning after the funeral, Dennis and his daughter are at the Long Island house. Dennis goes about his regular routine, quietly performing exercises on the front porch and then fixing breakfast for himself and his daughter. When his daughter joins him on the porch, they discuss the future. Dennis says he will invite family and friends to visit him on Long Island. He will invite Dan Lynch and the Quinns and their neighbors from Rosedale. Dennis will also invite Maeve. His daughter thinks perhaps he says this out of respect for Billy. However, Dennis does invite her and they have a nice time. Slowly over the next seven years they become closer until they wed in 1991.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The theme of faith seems to have come to a close for Dennis. The reader sees him content the day after Billy's funeral, ready to begin anew. Dennis makes plans, makes a list of those he intends to invite to visit him at the Long Island house now that he has retired there. Maeve is on this list. Ironically, the narrator, his daughter, wonders if perhaps it is because of Billy that Dennis asks Maeve. However, it becomes clear that with his faith renewed, Dennis is ready to move on with his life. Seven years later, in the theme of love, Dennis marries Maeve. This marriage is symbolic of everything Billy dreamed of and never found himself. It is ironic that it is Maeve who finally brings Dennis love, Billy's wife whom he could not find love with himself.



Characters

Billy Lynch

Billy Lynch is a charming Irish man who was born and raised in New York. Billy fought for his country in World War II and returns home to a world he is not sure of his place in. Billy and his cousin Dennis go to Long Island to fix up Dennis's stepfather's vacation home, taking the time to readjust to the civilian world. It is here that Billy finds the love of his life, a young Irish woman who is in the States to visit her sister. Billy charms the girl into an engagement ring, making promises he fully intends to fulfill.

Life without his girl, Eva, is difficult for Billy. Billy is a romantic, his head full of poetry. Billy needs passion in his life to feel fulfilled. During the time in which he is forced to wait for his lady to return, waiting to earn the money to send for her, Billy finds solace in church. Billy becomes devote in his religion, attending mass as often as he can. However, when Dennis informs Billy that Eva has died of pneumonia, Billy loses his faith.

Soon after the heartbreaking loss of his first love, Billy drowns his sorrows in alcohol. When he meets an elderly man who has also suffered loss, Billy finds a kindred soul. Soon he marries the man's daughter and becomes his drinking buddy. After the man's death, it is Billy who his wife must now care for, calling Dennis at all hours of the night to help her drag him into bed from wherever he might have passed out this time. It is Billy's death from alcoholism that pulls the family together and reveals a few secrets that may have changed the course of Billy's life if they had been known sooner.

Maeve Lynch

Maeve Lynch is a plain girl, a girl who may have become a nun if not for her sense of responsibility for her alcoholic father. Maeve's father is an ill, cruel man, who assures his daughter that Billy only wants to date her out of a sense of obligation. Maeve is not a stupid girl, she knows there are ulterior motives for Billy wanting her. However, Maeve is in love with the handsome shoe salesman and wants to be his wife no matter his reasons. Maeve spends her days taking care of her father, who becomes frailer as time passes. When her father dies, it is Billy Maeve soon is forced to care for day in and day out.

Maeve is a strong person who has suffered more emotional abuse than any one woman should have to face. Maeve's marriage is a sham. Billy marries Maeve because of her willingness to care for her father and his realization that he too will need that kind of help in his life. There is affection there, Billy sends her a post card that Maeve keeps for many years with the words, Beautiful Friend, printed on the back. However, as Dan Lynch will later wonder, would Maeve have been able to handle a man who loved her



the way any normal man should love a woman? It is a question that is later answered when Maeve marries Dennis Lynch.

Dennis Lynch

Dennis Lynch is Billy's cousin and closest friend. Dennis is the one Maeve calls when she cannot get Billy into bed after he has been out drinking, and whom she talks to when the pressure becomes too great. Dennis also fought in World War II and returned home about the same time as Billy. It is Dennis who takes Billy to Long Island the first time where they meet Eva and Mary. It is also Dennis who tells Billy the lie about Eva.

Dennis is also a bit of a romantic, however he has both feet securely on the ground. Dennis believes Billy's dream of marrying Eva and living happily ever after is the only thing that keeps himself and those around them from giving up on the idea of happiness altogether. This is why Dennis tells the lie and why he never tells anyone else the truth even after Billy learns the truth. Dennis feels guilt for what he has done and suffers a loss of faith over the whole ordeal. Only in Billy's death does Dennis finally find some peace with what he has done.

Eva

Eva is a beautiful young Irish girl who comes to the States to visit family and ends up helping her sister with the children she cares for on Long Island. Billy meets Eva on the beach at a little bay not too far from the house he and Dennis are staying in and falls madly in love with her. Later he proposes to her and spends the better part of a year saving money to bring her back to the States.

Eva is a selfish young lady who strings Billy along for more than a year and then marries her childhood sweetheart. Not only does she not tell Billy the truth herself, but she keeps the money he sends her to come back to the States to buy her new husband a gas station. Over the next thirty years, Eva is said to feel guilt over her actions; however, she never sends the money back to Billy. When Billy accidentally runs into her in Ireland, she apologizes for the money but not once does she apologize for breaking his heart. Eva does not understand what the big deal was in the first place and is still bitter that her sister, Mary, still has not forgiven her for her actions. Eva is said to be the reason Billy drank.

Sheila Lynch Holtzman

Sheila is Dennis's mother. Sheila is an unhappy woman who twice married because of circumstance rather than love. The first time she marries it is to protect herself from a predator of a man with whom she is to move in with. Her first husband is a kind man, the sort who is always trying to save the world. Sheila meets her first husband on the trolley of which he is the conductor. Daniel is full of stories and good spirits. Sheila believes with him she will finally have a home of her own, a place where she belongs.



Instead she finds he has a habit of taking in people as though they were stray dogs. Sheila meets her second husband in the shoe store he owns. This time she does get a home of her own, a nice home that is like a mansion to her.

Dennis sees his mother as an unhappy woman who is somewhat bitter about her life. Sheila lost her parents when she was young and was then shuttled from family to family, always in the way and one more mouth they could not afford to feed. This experience shapes her life to the point that she only sees depravation in her first husband's good deeds. Sheila is also disappointed in Dennis's choice to become one of the millions, a worker for Con Ed, instead of doing something different and dramatic with his life. Later in life, Sheila will have a change of heart and leave all her worldly goods to charity except for the Long Island house, which she leaves to Dennis.

Daniel Lynch

Daniel Lynch is Dennis's father and Sheila's first husband. Daniel is the first of the Lynches to come to America and it is Daniel who saves up the money and sends for all his brothers to join him. Daniel has a huge heart and often takes strangers into his home to give them a hot meal and a safe place to sleep. Everyone in the Lynch family believes Daniel is an angel, except his own wife who resents the time and attention his projects take from her. Daniel will later die in great pain and at his funeral family members will sing in his honor.

Mr. Holtzman

Mr. Holtzman is Sheila's second husband. Mr. Holtzman is German, a fact that does not sit well with Dennis when he first returns from World War II. Dennis eventually comes to accept his stepfather, however, and turns to him for help when it becomes clear that because of Billy's generous nature, he will not be able to send for Eva for a very long time. Mr. Holtzman gives Billy the money and then hires him to work in his shoe store to pay it back. Billy will continue to work in the shoe store until Mr. Holtzman sells it a year before his death. Mr. Holtzman is also the original owner of the Long Island house.

Kate and Rosemary

Kate and Rosemary are Billy's sisters. Kate is married to a successful business man who is not terribly kind to her early in her marriage and who never shows up for the funeral or the receptions following. Kate takes charge of Maeve in the aftermath of Billy's death, neither judging nor criticizing Maeve and her actions in Billy's life. It is Kate who stays with Maeve the night of the funeral. Rosemary is married also, and her husband is a big, kind Irish man. Rosemary has many opinions about Maeve and Billy, and she is not afraid to say them out loud. Rosemary also believes that Billy is heartbroken over Eva even after all these years, however, she also believes that Billy would have been an alcoholic anyway.



Dennis's Daughter

Dennis's daughter, who is never named throughout the book, is the narrator of the story. She is married when the funeral takes place with two children of her own. Dennis's daughter is close to her father and is the only one he tells about the secret of Eva besides Billy. Throughout the book, Dennis's daughter makes references to her husband as though she is telling him the story of her family directly. She believes that their finding each other at the Long Island house is redemption for the house after all the pain that had surrounded it before.

Mr. West and Matt

Mr. West is the year-round tenant Mrs. Holtzman rents the Long Island house to. Mr. West is married with three boys, however his marriage is so volatile that he and his wife often have screaming matches out on the front lawn where the whole neighborhood can see them. Mr. West rents the Long Island house to get away from his wife, however he returns to her every summer when Dennis uses the house for two weeks. When Mr. West finally leaves the house so Dennis can retire there, he returns to his wife and the two of them appear to have a stable and loving marriage after all those years of fighting.

Matt is Mr. West's son. Matt comes with Mr. West to the Long Island house to pick up a few things he left behind. Matt later comes back and finds Dennis's daughter walking alone from the bay. They talk for a long time and end up agreeing to a date. Matt later becomes the husband of Dennis's daughter and appears to be the intended reader of the novel.



Objects/Places

The Bronx Bar

The Bronx Bar is a small hide-away bar in the Bronx where Maeve arranges to have the reception after Billy's funeral.

The Long Island House

The Long Island house is a house owned by Dennis's stepfather where Billy met Eva.

The Bay

The bay is a small beach area not far from the Long Island house where Billy and Dennis meet Eva and Mary and where Dennis's daughter meets Matt, her husband.

The Shoe Store

The shoe store is a business owned by Dennis's stepfather, Mr. Holtzman.

Home Sweet Home Postcard

This postcard is the one Billy sends Maeve from Long Island with the words, Beautiful Friend, written on the back.

The Gas Station in Clonmel

The gas station in Clonmel, Ireland is the station Eva used Billy's five hundred dollars to buy after she married her childhood sweetheart.

Five Hundred Dollars

Billy borrows five hundred dollars from Mr. Holtzman to send for Eva. Billy ends up working for Mr. Holtzman Saturdays and Thursday evenings until he sells the store, years after his debt is paid.



The Bakery

The bakery is where Sheila once worked. It is here that the owner often gets drunk and tries to touch her in inappropriate ways, which leads to her meeting Daniel and deciding she must marry him.

Con Ed

Con Ed is a large electric company in New York where a majority of the Lynch family members work, including Dennis and Billy.

The Trolley

The trolley is where Sheila meets Daniel. Daniel is a trolley conductor for most of his adult life.

The VA Hospital

The VA is where Billy is taken when he falls in the street and he later dies here. Dennis also has to come to the VA to identify Billy's body.

Mr. Kehoe's Shoes

Mr. Kehoe, Maeve's father, always managed to lose his shoes under some bar somewhere. It is this habit that brings Maeve to the shoe store where she meets Billy. Maeve also threw her father's shoe down the incinerator twice to have an excuse to see Billy.



Themes

Love

There are many facets to the emotion of love, and this novel incorporates many of them. Love can be passionate, it can be passive, and it can be unrequited. The main love story of this novel is that between Billy and Eva. Billy loves Eva with a passion even the reader can feel through the description of his thoughts and actions. Billy wants to marry her, and wants to bring her back from Ireland so badly that he has indentured himself to Mr. Holtzman to years of working in his store. The reaction of those around him to his passion underlines the depth of his devotion, seen so clearly when Dennis initiates the arrangement with Mr. Holtzman. However, this love is unreciprocated as the reader will later see when Eva marries another man.

Also in the novel are the loves of Dennis and of his mother, Sheila. Sheila marries twice in her lifetime and both times it is not for love but for convenience. Sheila marries Daniel, Dennis's father, to save herself from becoming prey to a lecherous and immoral man. Sheila thinks at least she will have her own home, married to this man. However, his benevolent behavior steals even that from her. The second time she marries it is for security and to get out from under the thumb of Daniel's family. As long as she is Daniel's widow, she will always be their responsibility whether she wants the burden of their kindness or not. As Mr. Holtzman's wife, Sheila has the home she always wanted and no longer is forced to take the charity of those around her.

Dennis, too, finds himself in a less than passionate relationship with Eva's sister, Mary. Dennis fools himself into believing that he intends to marry her, however it is only his guilt in taking advantage in her romantic offerings that leads to this line of thought. Dennis and his mother are passive lovers, using their mates to attain what they believe they need. Only Dennis goes on to find true love with his wife, Claire, however this purity only comes on the eve of her death.

Maeve is an old maid by society's standards when she meets Billy. She falls passionately in love with Billy despite her awareness that he could never love her the way he did Eva. Billy himself seems to announce this truth to the world through the unnamed narrator when he sends the postcard to his wife naming her a friend. It seems to be the exact situation Billy experienced with Eva. Eva uses Billy for the money he sends her to come to him in the States and Billy turns around and uses Maeve to take care of him in his declining health. It is only after Billy's death that Maeve finally experiences true love and Dennis too finds this truth. Maeve and Dennis marry after the death of their spouses. The narrator supposes that this is finally the happily ever after that Billy expected after his first trip to the Long Island house.



Faith

Throughout the novel, several characters find themselves questioning their faith not only in God and the church, but also in life itself. Billy turns to the church while he waits for his love to return to him, finding solace in the routine of the mass and the beauty of the different churches he attends. To Billy, a passionate man who must have something larger than routine to fill his time; religion is a logical outlet. However, when he is told that Eva has died, Billy moves away from this faith, not only because he is angry with God for taking away such a beautiful person as his Eva, but because he no longer feels the passion in his own life. The only time Billy feels truly alive again after the death of his love is when he is drunk. Billy finds himself devoting more and more of his time with Maeve's father, discussing loss and the unfairness of it all, discussing redemption and Billy's lack of faith in it.

Dennis also has a challenge of faith. The death of his wife causes him to struggle with the same issues that Billy has struggled with since Eva. However, it is not only his wife's death, but the lie that burdens his soul that leads to Dennis's own struggle. For a person to have faith in something that cannot be seen or touched, one must fully believe in the power of life and the ability to control the outcome of your own destiny. Dennis has too easily changed Billy's destiny with one little lie told with innocence and the desire to protect his beloved cousin from the pain of knowing his love is not returned. If it is so easy for Dennis to manipulate Billy's destiny, then what about his own, what about Claire's? What if he had not bought all those cigarettes for her? Perhaps Claire would have outlived them all if not for Dennis. Toward the end of the story Dennis says he now understands everything, however, even the narrator wonders if he is telling the truth.

Family

Family is a strong theme throughout *Charming Billy*. From the beginning of the novel there is family around, Billy's cousins and sisters, sharing fond memories of a beloved member of the family. In the time in which Billy and Dennis grew up, there is nothing more important than family. However, the narrator shows how this notion changes through time. Dennis tells Billy his lie about Eva because he knows how the family will react, how they will smother Billy and make him feel like a fool. In contrast to this, when Dennis's own wife dies, his children back off and do not smother him, and do not encourage him to grieve in any way that does not come natural to him. In Maeve's generation, it is not unusual for a child to stay and take care of a widowed parent such as the way she stayed behind and took care of her own father after her mother's death. However, the narrator went off to college as quickly as she could after her mother's death, anxious to get away from the responsibility of caring for her father.

The image of a family implies strength and togetherness. Dennis's daughter observes her father's family after Billy's funeral and does not see this. On the surface they all seem content to be a part of something. However, Dennis's daughter can see their loneliness below the surface, each person in the room is unsure of how to deal with



Maeve's grief and unwilling to do more than the expected to help care for her. One family member wants to shuttle Maeve off to a convent. Another is dealing with a distant and abusive husband. Without the strong adhesive Dennis's father, Daniel, was, the family seems to have drifted apart more than the reader might have seen in the initial chapters. However, they are still a family and they still make the appearance even if they have lost something of the togetherness they might once have known.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is first person narrative. The novel is told in such a way, however, that most of the chapters appear to be written in the third person because the narrator is rarely a part of the events she is describing. It is as if the reader is listening to a friend tell a story rather than reading a novel about a group of interconnected characters.

By telling the story this way, the writer gives the reader more intimacy into the events of a past the narrator could only know through stories told to her by her father and other members of her family. The novel tends to drift back and forth between present time and several different points in the past. It would be impossible for the narrator to relate these stories, for example stories of her father's life before he had even met her mother, if the writer did not incorporate the third person narrative as if the narrator is telling a story to another person in much the same way it was told to her. In this way, the narration of this book could be described as an authorial narration in the idea that the writer herself is the character of Dennis's daughter, whether or not this character is fictional.

The main narrator, Dennis's daughter, is never named throughout the course of the novel and there are times when she addresses the character Matt, as you. This gives more credence to the feel of a person telling a story to another person. It is also this habit that increases the idea that the writer, Alice McDermott, is Dennis's daughter even if a fictional representation of herself. This narration has historically been demonstrated in such works as *Don Quixote* and *Don Juan*. It can also be described as an unreliable narration because of the fact that the narrator is not always aware of what is going on around her. However, the reader does not get the impression that the narrator of *Charming Billy* is unreliable.

Setting

Charming Billy is set in New York City and its many burrows where the Lynch family and their many cousins and other relations live. However, the bulk of the novel takes place on Long Island at the house where Billy met Eva. The house itself is rarely entered through the narration and described in detail only in the final chapter of the book. Yet it is almost another character in the novel. It seems the house is always on someone's mind throughout the novel no matter where they are at the time.

The house is almost an afterthought to Mr. Holtzman who only purchased it because it appeared to be a really good deal. The builder had gone bankrupt and his daughter is desperate to get rid of the house. Mr. Holtzman is rumored to have paid cash for the house with the money he had in his wallet when he went to see it. After he bought it, however, Mr. Holtzman forgot about it until about the time Billy and Dennis came back



from the war. Then it was only a decrepit little place that only meant a break from reality for two returning war heroes. Soon, however, it becomes a symbol of love and romance when Billy meets Eva, and then a sight of utter despair when he learns of her supposed death. Throughout the novel Billy refuses to return to the house, until the moment he learns that Eva has not really died. He returns only once, however the house remains a symbol of despair for him.

When the narrator, Dennis's daughter, meets her future husband, Matt, at the house, it suddenly becomes a symbol of love and romance again. It is on their first date that she learns how his father rented the place year round to escape from a torrential marriage, another man who saw the house as, if not a place of despair, then perhaps a place of refuge from a broken heart. It is Matt and her love that will redeem the house, Dennis's daughter believes. Perhaps she is right, because it is at this house where Dennis and Maeve find each other after he retires there.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in clear and easy to understand language. However, there are times when the language becomes somewhat formal and philosophical. The narrator often pauses in the middle of a scene to talk about the overall meaning of the situation. For example, when the narrator goes on her first date with her future husband, she stops in the middle of describing the date to discuss the depth of their feelings for each other and how it relates to the past heartaches that are a part of the past of the Long Island house.

The majority of the book is told in exposition, each scene told rather than shown. There is little dialogue throughout the novel. It is structured much like a literary novel rather than the typical best selling novel. However, the scenes that take place in the present time, like the day of the funeral, are told with more dialogue and longer scenes.

Structure

The novel is told in thirteen chapters with each varying in length. The first chapter begins in what appears to be the present, the day of Billy's funeral. However, with the second chapter the reader begins a journey through many jumps in time. The plot line moves from the funeral to a time when Billy is still a young man. There are also jumps further back in time to describe Dennis's mother and father. Then the novel jumps to middle age before returning once more to the day of the funeral. The end of the novel makes one more jump, this one seven years into the future.

The pace of the novel is slow and indulgent, this feeling enhanced by the lack of chapter numbers at the beginning of each chapter. The chapter lengths vary with some being extremely long and others only a few pages long. Each chapter usually contains a full story that could almost stand on its own, such as the story of how Billy met Eva, and the short biography of Dennis's mother, which explains so much to the reader who is curious why the woman seemed so jaded to Dennis's eyes.



The novel is told in such a way that it feels to the reader as if they are reading a text meant only for the eyes of the narrator's husband, Matt. There are many times when the narrator refers to Matt as you and talks about things it is clear she knows he already is aware of. The narrator is never actually named, though the reader is aware she is Dennis's daughter because there are many times when she refers to him as Dad. It is a unique way to tell a story, harking back to the time of Lord Byron and Chaucer.



Quotes

"Or, if they didn't think to call it beauty, they said courage - more appropriate to the occasion and the day - not meaning necessarily her new-widow's courage (with its attendant new-widow's clichys: bearing up, holding on, doing well), but the courage it took to look out onto life from a face as plain as butter: pale, downy skin and bland blue eyes, faded brown hair cut short as a nun's and dimmed with gray. Only a touch of powder and of lipstick, only a wedding band a small pearl ring for adornment." Chapter 1, pg. 3

"Better the women gather around Billy in real mourning, sit up with him all night if they liked, moaning about fate and loss and the inevitability of death, than have them turn their gummy sympathy, their studied silence on him every time there's a mention of love and marriage."

Chapter 2, pg. 31

"My mother might have been different, my father was fond of saying, if her life had been different (I was a teenager before I began to point out that this was true of us all), and I think that throughout his own life my father harbored in his heart a vision of his mother as a happy and pampered child whose bright eyes saw only the purest intentions." Chapter 3, pg. 39

"Of the (let's face it) half dozen or so basic versions of the Irish physiognomy, they had two of them: Billy thin-faced with black hair and pale blue eyes behind his rimless glasses; Dennis with broad cheeks, eternally flushed, and dark eyes and fair hair that had only begun to thin under his combat helmet, somewhere, he claimed, in northern France. One every inch the poet or the scholar, the other a perfect young cop or barman. The aesthete priest and the jolly chaplain."

Chapter 4, pg. 63

"In part, it was the anonymity: Forget what dreams you dreamt the night before, forget the adoring eye that beheld you over breakfast, or even the grief that had been wringing out your soul all night long, because the way she saw it, once you boarded the subway or the bus or joined the crawling stream of automobiles or found your space in the revolving door, the elevator, behind the desk or the counter or the machine, you became what you really were - you became, when you got right down to it, what you really were: one of the so many million, just one more."

Chapter 5, pg. 92

"Indistinctly, and as if from the corner of his eye, he saw what Billy's fine dream, Billy's faith, was going to come to. But he also saw, in his own (his own father's) romantic heart, that its consummation would become a small redemption for them all." Chapter 5, pg. 119



"And out of the crowd, in one silent moment as the coffin was lowered into the grave, Billy Sheehy's dad, all unrehearsed, began to sing. 'Danny boy,' of course. A lovely tenor that almost sounded like a record being played what with the raindrops on all the umbrellas. It nearly killed everybody, it was such a moment. And Dan Lynch had said to Dennis when it was over, both of them teenagers then, 'Your father would have loved this.' But Dennis pointed across the road to another, smaller group of mourners who were just leaving another grave. 'My father would be wondering why we hadn't invited them over,' he said." Chapter 7, pg. 138

"Serving them, Dan had poured three and then seemed taken aback when my father lifted the first and handed it to me. It might have been an aging bachelor's surprise to think that a woman - especially one he had known as a child - would accept anything stronger than sherry ('Would you rather a ginger ale?' he'd said), but it left me with the feeling that the glass had been meant for someone else. For Billy, perhaps. That I was sipping Billy's drink." Chapter 9, pg. 175

"My father would not tell Dan Lynch the truth. I knew simply by looking from one to the other that he would never tell Dan Lynch the truth. It was, after all, yet another sweet romance to preserve." Chapter 9, pg. 194

"Who can trace such things, he said, but it was perhaps the first tremor of the devastation that would strike him, knock him off his feet, in the weeks and months after my mother died. Billy's thirty years of misdirected prayer, Billy's tenacious, life-changing belief. His own lie."

Chapter 10, pg. 207

"How lonely they all seemed to me that night, my father's family and friends, lonely souls every one of them, despite husband and children and cousins and friends, all their hopes, in the end, their pairings and procreation and their keeping in touch, keeping track, futile in the end, failing in the end to keep them from seeing that nothing they felt, in the end, has made any difference."

Chapter 11, pg. 212

"This was the lesson it taught you, you said - we were already on our way, clothes falling off, as they did in those days, the sound of the ocean somewhere above us, the humid night, the same stars, our own summer idyll - this was your particular take on your particular broken home: that in the absence of love, the evaporation, the disintegration, the tossing out of the equation of love, came peace. This was your particular take: you had one or the other, paid for one with the other." Chapter 12, pg. 230

"As if, in that wide-ranging anthology of stories that was the lives of the saints - that was as well, my father's faith and Billy's and some part of my own - what was actual, as opposed to what was imagined, as opposed to what was believed, made, when you got right down to it, any difference at all." Chapter 13, pg. 243



Topics for Discussion

Discuss Dennis's decision to lie to Billy about Eva. The decision shapes the events of the novel. In which ways would things have been different if Dennis had told Billy the truth? Should Dennis have lied? Does it matter that Dennis's intentions were honorable?

Discuss Billy's alcoholism. In several places in the book it is debated whether Billy would have been an alcoholic if not for his belief that Eva had died. Others believe that Billy had a disease, which is an accepted theory today. What do you believe? Could the truth have changed the course of Billy's life?

Compare and contrast Sheila's two marriages and Billy's marriage to Maeve. How are they similar? Are their differences? Is what Sheila and Billy did to their spouses morally wrong?

Discuss the idea of morality in this novel. What Eva did to Billy is seen as morally corrupt by her own sister. Was Eva's actions the actions of a child who did not realize how she would hurt someone who loved her or were they the actions of a calculating adult woman without concern to Billy's feelings?

Discuss the family dynamic as it is addressed in the book. How have things changed? Is the change for the better?

Compare and contrast Billy and Dennis's father, Daniel. How are the two similar? How are they different?

Discuss the narration used in this novel. Why does the narrator never reveal her own name? How would use of third person narration throughout have changed the feel of the novel? What about first person through the eyes of another narrator? Through Dennis's eyes? Through Billy's eyes? Through Maeve's eyes?