

Has Anyone Seen Heather? Short Guide

Has Anyone Seen Heather? by Mary Rose Callaghan

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Overview

Has Anyone Seen Heather? is what the British call a "thriller," or mystery novel, though actually it is much more than that. It is about two teen-aged Irish girls, Clare and Katie Kelly, who live with their grandfather (their mother's father) and his sister in Dublin.

Their mother, married to an American actor but separated from him, lives in London and has promised the girls to bring them over to spend the summer with her and help set up an apartment, where they would all eventually live together. The girls look forward to the trip, but when they arrive, their mother, Heather, does not turn up. With little money in their pockets and somewhat bewildered by the great metropolis, the girls desperately try to find Heather, but with very little luck. They discover to their dismay that she has suddenly vanished from her place of employment and is suspected of stealing a valuable painting. The jobs the girls had counted on fall through and, so that they can stay in London and keep looking for Heather, they take low-paying live-in work as "chamberpersons" at a small hotel in Bayswater, a residential section in central London.

Afraid to admit to their grandfather what has happened, because they know he will insist that they immediately return to Dublin, and because they fear that the misadventure will further fuel the ill feeling between him and his daughter, Clare and Katie stick it out, putting up with discrimination, brutality, and other dangers. At one point, they try to enlist the services of a private detective, A. Beresford Clarke, who at first refuses to take them seriously. They later change jobs to escape a series of threats and wind up working at the "William Shakespeare," a restaurant and pub in Southwark near the site of the original Globe Theatre. Working a letter from Heather, forwarded by their grandfather in Dublin, but with no return address. Eventually, their mother calls them and they are reunited, but Heather is ill and in a nursing home, and still further adventures await Clare and Katie as they try to sort out some of the problems Heather has been having about the missing painting. A. Beresford Clarke now begins to take them seriously when he finds that the chocolates mysteriously sent them when they worked at the hotel were in fact poisoned.

At last all of the mysteries are resolved, but much to Clare and Katie's disappointment, they have to return to grandfather in Dublin and resume their schoolwork. Before they leave, their father, a reformed alcoholic, meets the girls, who forgive him his past errors and treatment of them and their mother. He and Heather are trying to reconcile, but all four are not yet ready to live together.

About the Author

Born On January 23, 1944, and raised in Dublin, Ireland, Mary Rose Callaghan was educated at the Sacred Heart Convent, a boarding school in Dundrum, from 1953 to 1956; then attended the Sacred Heart Convent in Monkstown until 1959; and finally attended the Loreto Abbey School in Rathfarnham, from which she was graduated in 1962. In 1964 she entered University College, Dublin, and took her baccalaureate degree in 1968. A year later she received her Diploma in Education and taught English and history in secondary schools in England for the next four years.

Although she had always wanted to be a writer, she did not begin writing until she returned to Dublin in 1973 to work on an art magazine. At first she wrote book reviews and art criticism, but in 1975 when she went to America *Has Anyone Seen Heather?*

to live, she began her first novel, *Mothers*, which was published in Ireland in 1982 and in the United States in 1984.

She has been writing ever since, although she occasionally taught a course at the University of Delaware, where her husband, the noted scholar of Irish drama and literary critic, Robert Hogan, was a professor of English until his retirement in 1993. They spend most of the year now in County Wicklaw, where they own a house in Bray.

Of the different influences on her writing, Callaghan recalls that both her parents were great storytellers. Her mother was very funny, and her father delighted in telling scary ghost stories.

Among literary influences, she acknowledges above all the great Russian dramatist and fiction writer, Anton Chekhov, but she is also interested in contemporary Irish novelists, mostly women (the men are too gloomy, she says). She enjoys American writers as well, like Saul Bellow, John Irving, Alison Lurie, and Alice Munro. She was fortunate early in her writing career to meet the British novelist Angus Wilson while he was Visiting Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Delaware. He encouraged her work, as did Catherine Rose, an innovator for women's writing, who accepted her first book for publication.

And of course her husband's criticism has also been extremely valuable.

Callaghan has worked in several genres, having published not only novels, but stories, a play, and a biography of Kitty O'Shea. She still writes some literary criticism but spends most of her time on fiction.

Setting

The novel is set in contemporary Dublin and London, with most of the action in recognizable London locales, such as Piccadilly Square, Knightsbridge, St. Paul's, and the southbank area called Southwark. When Clare and Katie first arrive, they find themselves in vast Euston Station, where the boat train from Dublin lets them off just before the commuter rush begins. In Piccadilly, Katie has a misadventure with the police, who suspect her of soliciting when she is innocently just trying to ask directions. Later in the novel, when the girls try to find their mother in Maidenhead, the scene shifts briefly to the suburbs and the Victorian splendors of that geographical area.

But mostly the sights and sounds of London and its heterogeneous population fill the pages of the novel, as experienced by two youngsters literally just off the boat from Ireland.



Social Sensitivity

As a novel of contemporary life, *Has Has Anyone Seen Heather?*

Anyone Seen Heather? alludes to or deals with many contemporary problems. Experience in London awakens the sisters to some of the more brutal facts of life, such as discrimination of various kinds. The Irish in London tend to be looked down upon, and youngsters particularly. Sexism, grossly revealed in the jobs they get, at one point sets Clare off against her wellintentioned Dublin friend Wally, when he tries to pay for a meal they have together in London on Katie's birthday.

Most startling of all (besides the attempted rape they witness) is the time when Liz, the barmaid at the William Shakespeare, tells Clare that she is pregnant and needs to have an abortion. Although educated by nuns, Clare is not "RC" (Roman Catholic) but "DA," meaning (she says) "Definite Agnostic." Nevertheless, the problem of abortion troubles her deeply, even as she accompanies Liz to the clinic and sees her home, only to watch her go out again the same evening with Jerry, her disreputable boyfriend.

Clare and Katie also become aware of exploitation of different kinds. In their first job as chamberpersons they are worked to exhaustion for low pay and poor room and board. At their next job, where working conditions are better, they are introduced to male exploitation of young women through Liz's boyfriend Jerry, who mistreats her terribly, at one point sending her home with a blackened eye. He tries to get on the good side of the sisters, offering them money (100 pounds) at one point, and almost succeeds with Katie but for Clare's intervention. The girls' own mother, Heather, is clearly the victim of her dissolute husband, whose erring ways cause the separation and the breakup of the family, until he returns as an apparently reformed and affectionate husband and father, thanks to attending Alcoholics Anonymous. But Callaghan does not sentimentalize; the novel does not end with "And they all lived happily ever after." Although the criminal rapist is caught and jailed and the innocent are exonerated, the girls must return to Dublin and Grandfather to await the rebuilding efforts of Heather and their father before the entire family can become reunited, as Clare would like.



Literary Qualities

Has Anyone Seen Heather? has all the ingredients of the well-made mystery novel, or thriller. Suspense builds upon suspense, mystery upon mystery, as one plot becomes entangled with another. Clare and Katie struggle hard to keep their grandfather from learning that Heather has not met them at Euston Station after all, even as they try to discover from him if she has sent word to them there. A strong antipathy develops between the sisters and Mrs. Hanna, the housekeeper who looks after Mr. Livingstone, Heather's invalid former employer, and they suspect her of sending the threatening letters; more, Katie even suspects her of stealing the painting that Heather allegedly took. The French professor becomes a sinister if shadowy presence in the novel, bringing a police investigator to the William Shakespeare to interrogate Clare. Meanwhile, Clare is afraid for her mother as well as for her sister and herself, since they have false identity cards (so they can get jobs in London) and thus try to steer clear of the authorities.

As befits a thriller, the novel is fastpaced and vivid. The two sisters have a striking realism that is conveyed partly by acute anxieties (Clare) or impulsive, teen-age behavior (Katie).

At the same time, the novel is self-reflexive, revealing an awareness of itself as a novel. Clare comments occasionally on the stuff of fiction, comparing what is happening to her and her sister to what happens in novels or other forms of literature, like Hamlet. The novel's literate character is revealed in other ways as well; for example, in the frequent allusions to books Clare has read or is reading, such as Dickens's *David Copperfield* or the work of Jean Paul Sartre. Katie's reading, appropriate to her age and character, is mainly Agatha Christie (Clarke calls her "Miss Marple") or Sherlock Holmes, which provides her with the clue and thus provokes her suspicion (rightly, as it turns out) that the box of chocolates they receive at the hotel may be poisoned.

But the definite, engaging personality of Clare Kelly, the older sister and the narrator (the novel is told in the first person) is its chief literary excellence. She is entirely credible; in addition, she wins the reader's sympathy as she struggles against mounting difficulties: first, her grandfather's opposition to the London trip; then her mother's failure to show up, followed by Katie's temporary arrest by the police; and finally the problems caused by working with an unsavory lot at the hotel, where she and her sister receive a threatening letter, phone call, and the suspicious box of candy. She has a winning way of speaking to the reader admonishingly like a character in *My Fair Lady*, as when she says near the end, speaking of the adventures she and her sister have had and her conviction that anything can happen: "If you don't believe me, just you wait, 'Enry 'Iggins." Indeed, the whole novel seems to be addressed to 'Enry 'Iggins, or any similarly skeptical person. The device works extremely well.



Themes and Characters

Although the novel certainly succeeds as a thriller, building suspense after suspense around—but not limited to—the disappearance of Heather Kelly, it is really more about growing up. As the older of the two sisters, Clare Kelly, the "sensible" one, takes responsibility for not only her younger sibling, but for her mother, too.

Throughout the novel she is deeply concerned for Heather's health and mental stability, and she is right to be, as things turn out. But she also has to *Has Anyone Seen Heather?*

hold the rein on Katie's impulsiveness, which gets them into difficulties, sometimes humorous ones, but more often serious ones, as when they open the door on an attempted rape in the hotel where they first work, or later when they sneak into Heather's employer's house to try to retrieve their mother's belongings. All of Clare's experiences turn into maturing ones, as she herself recognizes, perhaps most of all during her reunion with her father. This event is wisely withheld until the end of the novel when, because of her previous experiences, Clare is better prepared to exercise the maturity she has gained.

Another theme in the novel has to do with the credibility of young people.

As the author shows, too often teenagers are dismissed as dreamers or just crazy kids when something really is afoot that deserves adult understanding and aid. This is brought out, for example, in Clare's dealings with A. Beresford Clarke, the private detective she and Katie try to hire to help find their mother. Although he is right in arguing that Heather will turn up, as of course she does in the course of the novel, she really is ill and in trouble.

And if Clare and Katie are wrong about who it is that threatens them, they are right in feeling anxious, as Clarke discovers when he finally decides to help them.

Family life, particularly the problems young people have to face in a broken home—broken because of the irresponsibility of both parents, one of whom has outbreaks of violence—is another important focus in *Has Anyone Seen Heather?* Throughout the novel, Clare's longing for a normal home life speaks eloquently, not just for her but for countless others who are in a similar situation. Part of Clare's growing maturity comes with learning how to cope with this longing and accept certain realities without succumbing to bitterness and despair. Katie's immature behavior, by comparison, highlights Clare's struggle to grow up decently and humanely. Both are still young enough to quarrel with each other vigorously, but loving enough also to forgive and make allowances for the other's quirks of personality.

Many colorful characters people the novel and help develop its themes.



Clare's grandfather and his geriatric sister, Brigid, who has delusions of being kept a prisoner in their home, reveal another problematic family relationship, as the old man tries to look after her welfare as well as his granddaughters'. Clare's intellectual Dublin boyfriend, Wally, is another type of teenager, who turns up in London too, working as a streetcleaner, just when the girls really need a friend. The chef at the hotel where Clare and Katie work during their first weeks in London is a transvestite homosexual called "Jennifer," who begins by treating them shabbily but later changes his attitude when they rescue Mary, another Irish chamberperson, from an attempted rape. Her attacker is an eminent French professor of humanities against whom Mary refuses to press charges for fear of her family's reprisals against her.

The couple who run the William Shakespeare cafe are a typically untypical London pair: they are married, but he is gay and so they go out together with different men, as Liz the barmaid informs Clare. The novel, however, does not preach sexual license any more than it does promiscuity; on the contrary, although some humor emerges as Clare perforce becomes aware of a wider variety of people and personalities than she knew in Dublin, what she sees is not in itself very attractive or appealing, and some of it—such as Jerry's brutal treatment of his girlfriend Liz—is thoroughly revolting.



Topics for Discussion

1. Describe Clare and Katie's life in Dublin with their grandfather and Brigid. What are its positive qualities?

What are its negative ones? Is Grandfather a real tyrant, or is he genuinely concerned for the girls' welfare?

2. What is Brigid's role in the story?

Is she simply a comic eccentric? What aspects of Clare's character does she help to bring out?

3. How closely do Clare and Katie resemble people you know? Compare and contrast their reactions when they first arrive in London. With which one do you more closely identify? Why?

4. What are Irish-English relations like as experienced by Clare and Katie in London? Is there hostility on both sides? What is Clare's attitude to things English? Is she justified? Does Katie share her views?

5. Is Mary's refusal to press charges against the French professor convincing? What basically motivates her?

What is Clare's position in this matter?

6. Describe Mr. Livingstone and Mrs. Hanna and their relationship? Is Mrs. Hanna truly the ogre that Clare and Katie think she is? Are the suspicions against Heather justified?

7. How do Clare and Katie find A. Beresford Clarke? Why does he not take them seriously at first? Why then does Clare keep going back to him, and why does he take her to dinner?

8. How does Heather finally turn up?

Describe Clare and Katie's responses to seeing their mother at last.

9. Compare and contrast work at the hotel with work at the William Shakespeare. Why are Clare and Katie better off working at the William Shakespeare? Is the clientele any different? If so, what is it?

10. Describe the sisters' attitude to their absent father? Does this prepare us in any way for their reunion with him? Is that a surprise part of the ending, or a well motivated one?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find a detailed map of London and trace the movements of Clare and Katie after they arrive at Euston Station. Then mark the places where they work and other places that they visit, such as the Tower of London and St.

Paul's Cathedral. Briefly describe each location and compare the descriptions in the novel with what you can find out about them from an encyclopedia.

How accurate is the novel?

2. Define "sibling rivalry" and discuss whether or not it plays a significant role in the relationship between the two sisters. What other aspects of their relationship can you identify? Is theirs a typical one?

3. Compare *Has Anyone Seen Heather?*

with another "thriller" you have read.

Which one is better or more convincing? Why?

4. How does Mary Rose Callaghan make her characters appear true to life?

If you have met any like them, describe their similarities and your experiences with them.

5. Imagine that you find yourself in the same situation as Clare and Katie when Heather does not meet them.

What would you do differently? Why?

6. Discuss how forgiveness becomes an important theme in the novel.

7. Discuss examples of sexist behavior or male chauvinism in the novel and compare them with those you have actually witnessed or read about elsewhere. How serious is it a problem in your town or region?

8. Define the elements in Clare's growing maturity during the summer she spends in London. What significant changes in her character or personality can you identify and explain? Are there any comparable one's in Katie's?

9. Discuss the problem of teen-age pregnancy today. Is Liz's attitude typical? Compare Clare's asexual relationship with Wally. Is Callaghan sending a message here?

For Further Reference

"Callaghan, Mary Rose." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*.

Edited by Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994: 56-57. Summarizes Callaghan's career. Quotes Callaghan as saying that she hopes to write more books for young adults.

Related Titles

Callaghan's first novel, *Mothers* (1982) treats the story of three generations of Irish unmarried mothers. Although it touches on the subject of abortion, it is pro-choice. Topical in Ireland at the time of publication, it remains undated today and has several interesting, comic characters. Her second novel, *Confessions of a Prodigal Daughter* (1985), set in Dublin in the early 1960s, takes for its narrator an artistic teenager, Anne O'Brien, and examines mother/daughter conflicts.

The Awkward Girl (1990) humorously weaves the story of Sally Ann Fitzpatrick, a young contemporary Irish woman, with the people she meets as she moves between the worlds of middle class Dublin and American academia. The chapters, which can be read separately as short stories, display contrasting viewpoints.

Other novels about Irish teenagers include: Vincent Banville's *Daisy Chain War* (1990), which tells the story of an Irish family during World War II; Jennifer Johnston's *The Gates* (1973), about a young Irish orphan, who goes to an Irish Big House to live with her downon-his-luck uncle; and Johnson's *Shadows on our Skin* (1977), set in Derry, Northern Ireland, which shows how innocent people can become involved with the Provisional IRA.



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