

This Must Be the Place Study Guide

This Must Be the Place by Maggie O'Farrell

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Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide specifically refers to the following version of this book: O'Farrell, Maggie. *This Must Be The Place*. Alfred A. Knopf First United States Hardcover Edition, 2016.

This Must Be the Place is a multigenerational novel of family by Maggie O'Farrell revolving largely around the lives of Daniel and Claudette Sullivan. The novel weaves back and forth through time, telling the story of Daniel and Claudette, as well as some of their children and other family members between 1944 and 2016. When the novel opens, Daniel, Claudette, and their three children live in a remote house in northern Ireland, far from anyone else. Daniel, an American by birth and a professor, travels to Belfast to deliver a lecture, then travels to New York to celebrate his father's birthday. On his way to Belfast, Daniel is struck by news that a woman named Nicola Janks has died.

From this point on, the novel moves back and forth through time, focusing on one character at a time. It is revealed that Claudette is a famous actress who staged her death to live a quiet, family life. Her former lover and director, Timou Lindstrom, protects her whereabouts and life as it is now with Daniel. Daniel himself, following the death of his grandfather in Ireland and divorce from his adulterous wife, travels to Ireland to gather his grandfather's ashes. While there, he meets Claudette, who has suffered a flat tire. The two quickly take to one another, get married, and have children. Claudette urges Daniel to reach out to his children from his first marriage in California, but they never respond to him.

When Daniel travels to New York for his father's birthday, he also visits his children, Niall and Phoebe. The three of them realize their letters have all been intercepted and destroyed by Niall and Phoebe's mother. From here on out, Daniel and his children will begin to grow closer together until Phoebe's accidental death several years later. Meanwhile, Daniel looks up his old college friend and roommate, Todd, to learn what has happened with Nicola Janks. It is revealed that Nicola Janks, a professor and celebrity, dated Daniel while Daniel was a student—but that her decision to have an abortion ruptured the relationship, after which Daniel cheated on Nicola and led to their breaking up. Nicola's death, it is revealed, came by way of a weakened heart from anorexia brought on by a broken heart over Daniel. As it is revealed, Daniel sent a letter to Nicola to ask her to come to America with him, but Todd intercepted the letter.

Claudette realizes Daniel's trip back to the States has been for several reasons, and this causes a rift between the two of them that is made worse later by Daniel's depression and alcoholism after Phoebe's death. This in turn heads toward divorce. Daniel struggles to get a hold of himself, and finally gets clean after making a promise to his son and Claudette to stay sober. As the novel comes to a close, Daniel visits Claudette and the children in Ireland, at which time he is prepared to move all of his things out. However, he and Claudette realize they are still in love with one another, and so the two of them decide to move back in together.



The Strangest Feeling in My Legs – It's Really Very Simple

Summary

The Strangest Feeling in My Legs: Daniel, Donegal, 2010 – Daniel Sullivan stands at his back door when his reclusive wife, Claudette, fires off a gun outside, scaring Daniel. Daniel follows her into the house to warn her about keeping guns in a house with children, even though he knows his wife fires the gun to scare off anyone she imagines might be lurking around the fence. Daniel's six-year-old daughter, Marithe, and baby son, Calvin, however, are not bothered by the gunfire. Daniel finds it strange his wife will not let him smoke in the car around the kids, but that she has no problem running around with a gun.

Daniel then heads off to catch the train for work in Belfast, where he usually spends the workweek. Daniel is a professor of linguistics. On the radio, he hears that Nicola Janks, a female engineer, has died. Daniel reflects on knowing her some years before. Daniel is set to return to his native New York for his father's ninetieth birthday. It will be his first visit in five years. Daniel and Claudette live in a very sparsely populated valley in Donegal, Ireland. It has been ten years since Daniel has come to Ireland. Daniel recalls his then-wife was cheating on him, which led him to cheat and his wife to sue for divorce while denying Daniel the right to see his kids.

Daniel recalls how his grandfather died of a brain hemorrhage on vacation in Ireland seconds after expressing to his wife he had a strange feeling in his legs, after which Daniel's grandmother expressed regret about now even looking up from her sewing, and always reminded Daniel to look up. Daniel remembers being the one to have to go and retrieve his grandfather's ashes from Ireland, and that it was during this visit he met a boy named Ari, who said he was Claudette's son and that Claudette had a flat tire. Daniel recalls Claudette believing someone had "sent" him to deal with her, and believing Claudette was crazy. He remembers accidentally leaving his grandfather's ashes beside Claudette's car, and Claudette having them returned. Daniel also remembers how Claudette, a famous actress, simply disappeared, causing chaos.

Back in the present, Daniel has finished up his lecture for the day, and now prepares to head back to New York. The trip worries him. He heads through a park on his way to the airport, where he sees a father seeking to help his daughter with her eczema.

I Am Not an Actress: Claudette, London, 1989 – Claudette has very recently graduated from university. She and her friends are scrambling to find work. Claudette takes a temporary job with the Film Society, stuffing envelopes with flyers. After two weeks, the Society offers Claudette a permanent job as an administrative assistant, which Claudette happily accepts. Among her responsibilities is to deal with arrangements for actors and directors. She meets a writer and director named Timou Lindstrom, who



encourages her to act in his upcoming film. Claudette explains she is not an actress, but Timou explains this is why she would be perfect. Timou continues to press her to act.

Down at the Bottom of the Page: Niall, San Francisco, 1999 – Niall, Daniel's son, is impatiently waiting for his father to pick him up from school, but Daniel is late. Niall is very observant and scientific in his approach to things, carefully noting how his father seems tense and distracted when he arrives. Daniel brings Niall to the Pediatric Acute Dermatology Daycare, a place Niall has been going since he was born due to his horrible eczema. At the clinic, Niall watches as his father begins to add graffiti to posters of children who advertise eczema treatment, but who do not appear to have it. After a round of treatments, Niall can hear his father arguing with someone about the defaced posters. The narrator interrupts the story to explain that months later, Niall will remember leaving the treatment center as one his last, strongest memories with his father, who will suddenly disappear.

It's Really Very Simple: Phoebe, Fremont, California, 2010 – Eleventh-grader Phoebe Sullivan and her friends Casey and Stella are underneath the bleachers at the game with Mike Lepris and Phil. Mike forces Phoebe to take a hit from a bong but Phoebe does her best to pull her head away. Half-high and angered, Phoebe takes off on her own. In the parking lot, Phoebe sees Stella talking to Niall. Phoebe greatly admires Niall, whom she finds intelligent, cool, and a hard-worker. Niall knows that Phoebe is high, and warns her against it. Phoebe tries to explain, but Niall cuts in and says that their father has called him. Niall explains Daniel is in New York, but will be flying out to see them. He is already on his way.

Niall and Phoebe meet Daniel for coffee. Daniel is proud that Niall is working at Berkeley, like he once did; and Daniel is curious about how Niall still battles eczema. Suddenly, Phoebe lashes out, wanting to know why her father suddenly left them, where he went, and why. Daniel explains he has been living abroad, has been denied custody, and has written to them –though these letters were never given to Niall or Phoebe because of their mother intercepted them. Now calmed down, Phoebe asks about Daniel's new life in Ireland. When Daniel shows them a photo of Claudette and the children, Niall recognizes Claudette.

Analysis

Physical distance is not emotional or mental distance. This much is thematically clear as Maggie O'Farrell's novel *This Must Be the Place* begins. Daniel and Claudette, along with their children, live in a very remote, very isolated valley in northern Ireland – so remote that Daniel must usually spend the work week in Belfast, coming home only on the weekends, and so remote that visitors and strangers seem unlikely – though this does not stop Claudette from randomly firing off guns in the belief someone is lurking nearby. Claudette's guns are not a symbol of her paranoia, but of her desire to stay clear of her past. Even though she is now years removed from a staged death and no longer the famous actress she was, Claudette cannot escape the past. She is still emotionally and mentally drawn back to the life she knew, and this always troubles her.



The same is true of Daniel. The reader should note that hearing a radio announcement of Nicola Janks's death grips Daniel in a way that the physical distance between him and the past cannot prevent.

As it is, Daniel travels to Belfast each week to work and earn money for his family, while his decision to travel back to America is predicated on his desire not only to celebrate his father's birthday – even though the two are not particularly close – but his desire to finally see his children. The physical distance between Daniel and his children cannot ease the hurt and pain he feels from not having heard from them in years. Daniel knows that physical distance cannot heal, replace, or fix emotional and mental distance. He also knows how important the bonds of family are. The idea that family bonds are immensely strong becomes centrally thematic to the novel, as the events of the novel will come to revolve around Daniel, Claudette, and their family. Claudette has urged Daniel to seek out his children in person, and now he is doing just that.

As Daniel learns, his ex-wife has intercepted the hundreds of letters he has written to his children. This recognition seals understanding between Daniel and his children that not only is physical distance but emotional and mental distance; Daniel still very much loves his children and thinks about them all the time, as they do him. Daniel has thought sad and terrible things about not having his children in his life – evidence that the mind is a powerful thing, and which itself becomes a subtle theme through the rest of the novel – but he is thrilled beyond belief to be reconnecting with them.

Just as the novel begins to veer between the past and the present – beginning in 2010 but extending, in this section of the novel, all the way back to 1989 – the narrator interrupts the narrative as it is unfolding to tell the reader, omnisciently, what will happen in the future. So here, the reader by virtue of the narrator, becomes omniscient as well. This allows the reader to see that present events (which will become past events in the future) have a powerful hold on people long afterwards, such as Niall remembering being at the treatment center with Daniel. This also underscores the thematic argument that no one – apart from the narrator and readers - knows what the future will bring. The reader is thus not a participant in, but an observer to, the drama that is unfolding.

Discussion Question 1

What does Claudette hope the remote and isolated setting of her home will do for her and for her family? How does this relate to her worrying and carrying around a gun? Do you believe she is correct to be worried? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

When Daniel is in the United States, apart from celebrating his birthday, what does he decide to do in California? Why? Why does this matter both to him, and to the other individuals involved? What resolution is reached from this? What does it do for them? Why does this matter?



Discussion Question 3

Daniel calls his wife crazy, but does not mean crazy as in mentally insane. Why does he ascribe craziness to his wife? Why do you think he tolerates such behavior from her?

Vocabulary

improbable, recluse, ostentatious, guttural, homunculus, irksome, grammatical, depopulate, octogenarian, sabbatical, plight, pneumatic, imperious, proximity, novena, intoning, vacancy, solicitous, dithered, interchangeable



Auction Catalogue – Severed Heads and Chemically Preserved Grouse

Summary

Auction Catalogue – An auction catalogue from June 2005 is presented featuring Claudette Wells memorabilia following her supposed death. These include a date planner, a vintage scarf, a book containing a draft of a letter to Timou Lindstrom, till receipts, a snow globe of Westminster Bridge and Big Ben, a copy of the book *A Short Residency in Sweden* by Mary Wollstonecraft, a Marimekko shoulder bag, three strips of 8mm cine-film of Claudette shot by Timou, Claudette's copy of the original script for *Out to the Island*, a vintage dress, three magazines featuring interviews with Claudette from 1991, two postcards from Lindstrom to Claudette, an audiocassette mixtape to Claudette from Lindstrom, a vintage leather document case, fax correspondence between Lindstrom and Claudette in which Lindstrom's girlfriend has left him and Claudette worries she has been the cause, two pieces of coral from the Indian Ocean, a framed print of cloud formations entitled *Wolkenformen*, five floppy disks, a tissue with a lipstick blot, nine magazines signed to Derek Roberts (personal assistant to Claudette), a star-shaped ashtray, a makeup bag, a gray silk dress, a pair of sneakers, a greeting card from November 1993 to Claudette from her brother Lucas, a pair of sunglasses given to Claudette from Wells, Claudette's August 1993 New York hospital ID band denoting her being admitted for stress-related exhaustion, and a letter to a private security company with a note urging Claudette not be told.

How a Locksmith Must Feel: A Phone Call, to California, Donegal 2010 – Daniel calls home to Claudette. She wants to know where he has been. He reveals he has gone to Fremont to see his children, which Claudette supports. The narrator interrupts the story to explain that Daniel does not know that Phoebe will come to e-mail him and visit with him for the rest of her life, until she is killed in an accident several years from then. The narrator returns to the story. Though Claudette supports Daniel's seeing his children, she opposes him not telling her –or anyone. She explains that Marithe and Calvin want to put on a play for Daniel's return. Daniel explains he is going to extend his trip by a few days to find an old friend named Todd in Sussex, England. This angers and upsets Claudette, who hangs up on him.

Enough Blue to Make: Claudette, New York, 1993 – Claudette looks out through the bathroom window, smoking a cigarette, surrounded by blue smoke. Timou cautions Claudette against smoking, saying it will kill her. Claudette and Timou are romantically involved. Timou reminds Claudette that there is a journalist awaiting an interview with them in their living room. He encourages her not to bolt again as she has in a previous interview. The two then have sex before heading out to the interview, with Timou telling her to strike while the eye is hot.



Claudette listens to Timou speak about the work he has done on his newest film, as if he has done it all alone. Claudette struggles to answer questions, so Timou begins answering for her, saying that the film will give joint credit to them both, as the film will blur boundaries between roles. Claudette begins to think about the now-finished film, and feels as if something about it is not quite right. She suddenly decides to get up, and goes to the assistant's desk. The girl quit a month ago, and Claudette remembers her using the phrase "strike while the eye is hot." Everything seems to fade for Claudette.

Where Am I and What Am I Doing Here?: Daniel, New York, 2010 – Daniel wakes up on his parents' bed in their Brooklyn home. His stepmother, Myrna, asks him if he is alright. Daniel apologizes for falling asleep on the bed, saying he came in to make a phone call. He tells Myrna he is facing a dilemma, and perhaps she can help. Daniel confirms Myrna's consideration that it has to do with a woman other than his wife. Myrna tells Daniel to head home to his wife and leave everything else alone.

The Kind of Place You'd Have Trouble Getting Out Of: Lenny, Los Angeles, 1994 – Lenny trails Timou on a bike as Timou jogs through Los Angeles. Timou hates Los Angeles, but has come West for the sake of Claudette, who is currently shooting a ghost movie. Lenny himself works as an assistant to Timou. Claudette is now pregnant, and wants a tofu steak to eat.

The narrator here interrupts the story to explain that Lenny will not remember much about working for a few years in the film industry, but he will remember meeting Claudette for the first time and later reading about her disappearance on the Baltic Sea in the papers. The narrator says that Lenny will remember how kind and friendly Claudette was, how down to Earth she was, and how Claudette suspected Timou of cheating on her.

Show Me Where It Hurts: Marithe, Donegal, 2010 – Marithe listens to a dinner conversation her mother has with her mother and brother about suspecting Daniel of seeing another woman. Lucas says he does not think Daniel is like that. Marithe decides to head off on her own, ultimately coming to the henhouse to throw Iceberg, Ari's hen, into the henhouse. She misses her older brother, and wonders when he will be back to visit from boarding school. Marithe later asks her mother about this, and about the idea of "another woman." Claudette then calls out her mother and brother and begins to yell at them.

Severed Heads and Chemically Preserved Grouse: Todd, The Scottish Borders, 1986 – Todd Denham attends a wedding north of London, having come up the previous evening. He sees an attractive teen girl working at the hotel at which the wedding is taking place, and considers taking drugs. He decides the risk of being caught is worth the rush and pops an unknown pill in the middle of the wedding. He also reflects on how he only does drugs on Saturdays and special occasions, knowing he needs his brain for his future employment. A friend named Suki catches him, however, and asks for some. Todd tells her he has no more. He and Suki decide to go and find his friend and roommate, Daniel, believing him to be downstairs somewhere.



Daniel will be flying back to America in a few hours, as his mother is dying. Todd discovers Daniel appears to be high, and asks what he has taken. Todd quickly brings Daniel outside into the fresh air away from everyone else. Todd tells Daniel he has seen Nicola Janks at the wedding, and that Nicola looks thin. Todd knows Daniel needs to sober up and to speak to Nicola. Nicola is several years older, has her own lectureship, is a media pundit, and has written many books on gender and society; she has also been romantically involved with Daniel, but an abortion by Nicola shattered the romance between them leading Daniel to have an affair. At the wedding, Daniel and Nicola get to talking. Nicola explains her thinness as an old demon reasserting itself, but that she will be good soon. Daniel tells Nicola to get well. In the morning, Daniel heads off to his flight.

Analysis

The mind is a powerful thing. Claudette's mind has been spinning in circles wanting to know where Daniel has been. This is ironic given Claudette's own infamous disappearance, but what is intended here is not callousness so much as it is concern and worry on Claudette's part. However, Claudette's concern and worry will soon morph into suspicions that Daniel is cheating on her. The mind is a powerful thing and cannot be controlled once it breaks loose. Such is the case with Daniel regarding Nicola Janks. Daniel was a mess-up in college and in his twenties, and his dating the much-older Nicola Janks led to a toxic kind of relationship which was ruptured by an abortion and by Daniel cheating on Nicola. Their break-up devastated them both, but Nicola more so. Daniel has long worried her death is directly attributable to him. This is why he is determined to seek out Todd, and the result of this will become apparent in coming chapters. The reader also learns how Claudette first got into acting, as well as how the foundations were laid for how she would one day escape it.

Claudette's worry for Daniel, and Daniel's worry about Nicola, is proof that physical distance is not emotional or mental distance. Just because someone physically gets away from something does not mean they are actually free of it. They can still be emotionally and mentally defined, influenced, or affected by it. Even the passage of time does not guarantee that someone can fully recover, if they can recover at all. No one knows what the future will bring, O'Farrell points out through this approach. Claudette does not know if the future means Daniel will be cheating on her; and Daniel himself never realized that the present (which was the future a few decades before) would ever be manifested as the present. Likewise, the items of Claudette's being auctioned in the catalogue would likely never have previously been suspected to be auctioned after her staged death in such a way. The catalogue also demonstrates that, even years after her supposed death, Claudette is still very much in the public mind, and very much a hot topic. The auction catalogue proves that Claudette is right to be worried about being discovered and thrust back into the public eye.

The idea that the future is unknown extends only as far as the characters of the novel themselves. The narrator and the reader retain their elite, God's-eye view of the people and events of the novel. The reader should note that the narrator continues to interrupt



the novel to talk about future events – some which will come to pass by the end of the novel in 2016, and others which will still be in the future. This prepares the reader for events which will come, but also helps to contextualize events as they currently are. Given the fact that the novel jumps around so much, and reveals only bits and pieces of a fuller story at a time, the contextualization through revelations of the future is very helpful to understand the story as it currently is.

Discussion Question 1

How does Claudette first get into acting? Why is she reluctant to begin acting? Why does she ultimately decide to act?

Discussion Question 2

What past is there between Daniel and Nicola Janks? Why does this matter to the plot as well as to Daniel? Why does this have such a hold on Daniel?

Discussion Question 3

Are Claudette's suspicions that Daniel may be having an affair grounded or baseless, especially in relation to the ideas that the past and the mind are powerful things? Why?

Vocabulary

forthcoming, articulacy, anarchic, abruptly, incomprehensibility, proprietorially, infringement, myopia, admonishment, astute, oblivious, debonairly, elusive, hazarded, preamble, conscientiously, appallingly, charade, amelioration, pejoration, revelatory, brittle, atonal



Something Only He Can See - The Dark Oubliettes of the House

Summary

Something Only He Can See: Lucas, Cumbria, 1995 – Lucas smokes a cigarette out in his garden. Formerly social workers, Lucas and his wife, Maeve, now work as Outward Bound-type adventure guides for kids. Lucas takes a call from Claudette. Lucas asks where Claudette is, and Claudette asks if he fancies a quick change of scene.

A short time later, Lucas and Maeve are in northern Ireland, having arrived at a very rural airport. Claudette and baby Ari pick them up and take them to the run-down, isolated farmhouse she has purchased. Claudette lays out a request: she wants Lucas and Maeve to legally adopt Ari, though Ari will continue to live with Claudette. This will help her should she ever decide to get away for a while, she explains. Lucas makes Claudette promise him not to disappear, or do anything like that, without telling him. She tells him not to believe anything he will soon hear, and to hold steady until she gets in touch with him. She also tells Lucas not to tell their mother about anything, yet. Lucas reluctantly agrees.

The Tired Mind is a Stovetop: Daniel, Sussex, 2010 – Todd is now a high school teacher. Daniel has tracked him down online. Daniel is worried about Nicola, having tried repeatedly to contact her from the States, but has been unable to do so. He worries he has heard correctly on the radio, that Nicola Janks is dead. School lets out, and Daniel's thoughts are interrupted. He sees Todd, who now dresses respectably, and Daniel follows him to a Chinese food place.

Todd is stunned to see him, not recognizing him at first. Todd is unhappy because it has been almost 30 years since Daniel went to the States and never came back. Todd tells Daniel he could have at least picked up a phone. Daniel knows he must move carefully because only Todd has the keys to what has happened. He apologizes to Todd for everything, then brings up Nicola Janks to find out what happened to her. Todd is surprised no one contacted Daniel. Todd explains Nicola died not of drug use with Daniel, but of a weak heart due to anorexia. Todd also mentions something about a letter, but refuses to say anything further about it. Daniel realizes Todd must have hidden the letter he wrote to Nicola, asking her to come live with him in Berkeley. Daniel confronts Todd about this, realizing this must have been why Nicola ended up dying, because she lost hope when Daniel never wrote to her. Daniel then blames her death on Todd. Todd rushes out and jumps on a bus to get away.

Oxidized Copper Exactly: Claudette, Goa, India, 1996 – Claudette is in India with Timou preparing for a new film. It is very hot out, and Claudette notices a bird brooch on the clothing of the young woman working in wardrobe. Claudette compliments the brooch. The young woman thanks her. Claudette explains it is oxidized copper. Instead of



heading to the set, Claudette goes to see how Ari is doing, but Ari has already gone to sleep. Timou comes to see Claudette, wondering why she is not on set. Claudette asks for half-an-hour, and Timou agrees to this. Claudette asks for privacy from both Ari's nanny and her personal assistant, Derek, who gladly steps out to get some coffee. Now alone, Claudette envisions escaping with the sleeping Ari, driving off and away from everything and everyone, thereafter staging her and Ari's deaths. The narrator interrupts the story to explain that, a few years from now, Claudette and Ari will be with Timou and his parents on their yacht, sailing the Stockholm Archipelago, at which time Claudette stages her death and Ari's death by taking a small rowboat to get away while everyone else is sleeping. The narrator reveals that Timou will receive the single line "I'm sorry. Cx" on his pager in explanation.

The Girl in Question: Teresa, Brooklyn, 1944 – Teresa, a librarian with first-aid training, uses her scarf to tie around the palm of a boy who has deeply cut his hand on the subway. She then directs the boy and his uncle to the hospital. The narrator interrupts the story to say that Teresa will remember this for the rest of her life, including in the hours before death when her son, Daniel, is by her side. The narrator then returns to the story. Teresa feels as if she knows the uncle, but cannot place it. Teresa herself is engaged to Paul Sullivan, who is then fighting the Nazis in Europe. A week later, the uncle shows up at the library with a replacement scarf for Teresa.

The man explains it was the least he and his sister could do, and that his nephew, Jack, is all good, and is proud of his stitches. The man introduces himself as Johnny Demarco, but Teresa explains she is engaged. Four years pass. Paul has returned home, and he and Teresa have married. They now run the family general store. One day, Johnny comes in with his wife, Lucia, and their son. Johnny and Teresa recognize each other instantly. Years pass. Teresa's family grows, including baby Daniel. Daniel comes to love the water, so Teresa brings him on a boat ride. She encounters Johnny on the boat ride. Johnny says he should have made a move on Teresa at the library, and makes her promise to always let him know where she is, so that if things change in the future, they might be together.

The Dark Oubliettes of the House: Daniel, Donegal, 2010 – Daniel is so thrilled to be returning home that he leaps the gates leading up to the property. Yet, when he enters the house, no one is there, not even the dogs. Daniel realizes Claudette has gone. Daniel now considers himself Timou Lindstrom the Second, and wonders how Timou handled the disappearance. Daniel has long suspected that Claudette would do such a thing to him, and remembers visiting the place he would come to call home for the first time at Claudette's invitation. He remembers saying "This must be the place" upon arrival. He remembers instantly connecting with Ari because he was the fatherless son and Daniel was the sonless father. He also remembers promising to keep secret the truth of Claudette's identity. As Daniel considers the present situation, he realizes he knows exactly where Claudette must have gone.



Analysis

The theme of physical distance not equating to emotional or mental distance is clear as Daniel tracks down Todd. At first, readers agree with Todd that Daniel should have been in touch at some point in the preceding three decades, but when the reader learns that Todd was instrumental in denying Daniel contact with Nicola, Daniel's decision not to contact Todd is very understandable. Daniel's whole point in seeking out Todd was not only because his physical distance from the past did not give him the emotional and mental space he had hoped, but because the past itself has a very powerful hold on the present. Daniel has worried he has had something to do with Nicola's death, but Todd's intervention has demonstrated that Daniel had nothing to do with it. Daniel blames Todd for Nicola's death; whether Daniel is being fair or unfair, readers will have to decide for themselves.

As the novel continues to unfold, O'Farrell's argument that the bonds of family are immensely strong is apparent in the presence and role of relatives in the lives of Daniel and Claudette. Lucas becomes a willing participant in events that will ultimately lead to Claudette's staged disappearance, while Daniel's own faint memories of childhood reveal his mother having an emotional affair with a man other than her husband. At first, this in particular seems completely out of place with the rest of the novel, but it will have great relevance in the future. The narrator intends to show what missed chances can look like, as Johnny himself says he should have gone after Teresa when he had the chance before she was married. Now, there are only regrets.

The style of narrative interruptions for the sake of context and future events are had once more. The reader will note the scene in which Claudette tends to sleeping Ari, putting off filming by a half-hour to spend some quiet time with her son. Here, the narrator notes that this day will be the real foundation of Claudette's future disappearance. It is clear that Claudette is growing tired of her acting schedule, and has a greater desire to be a mother than to be famous. She finds peace in family – and here, the reader again glimpses the thematic argument that family bonds are immensely powerful. Claudette does not mind acting, but hates the public display that must come with it. She wants a simple, quiet life. The reader should note, however, that there is great irony in Daniel coming home to find Claudette gone, just as Timou awakened to discover Claudette gone. But unlike Timou, Daniel has a hunch as to where Claudette has gone. She has fled from one life to begin another, but now she will flee from one life to one that has already existed.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Daniel so concerned about Nicola's death? What answers does he seek from Todd? Why does this matter so much to Daniel?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Daniel blame Todd for Nicola's death? Do you believe Todd is to blame? If so, why? If not, why not?

Discussion Question 3

When Daniel returns home, what does he find has happened? Why does this shock and hurt him so much? How does he cope with this unfolding situation? Why?

Vocabulary

crypticism, balaclava, unchaperoned, staccato, monologue, corporeal, astonishing, marsupial, utterance, unremitting, interspersed, trundle, coshed, nuance, ramifications, candor, soporific, reverie, susurrations, dematerialized, incredulity, bonhomie, vigorously, affronted, fastidiousness, mellifluous, alleviate, inexorably, oubliette, scrutiny



The Logical Loophole - Absolutely the Right Tree

Summary

The Logical Loophole: Maeve, Chengdu, China, 2003 – Maeve has come to China to adopt a baby girl named Zhilan, though Lucas has had to stay home. Claudette has come along to offer support. Maeve is both worried and thrilled about becoming a mother. The baby cries a lot, leading Maeve to think the baby hates her. Claudette helps Maeve handle the early struggles of being a mother, such as settling and feeding the baby.

A Jagged, Dangerous Mass of Ice: Ari, Suffolk, 2010 – Ari is forced to meet with a school guidance counselor who worries about Ari having been homeschooled for so long. The counselor also questions Ari's stammer, which he says is only the tip of an iceberg. The counselor also reveals the staff of the school are concerned about Ari and Sophie Bridges dating. They believe he has been a bad influence on her because she has dyed and cut her hair and is interested in things like poststructuralism. Ari counters that most of the kids at the school do drugs, drink, have sex all the time, but none of them are called to account for their actions. The counselor also wants to know why the school must usually deal with Ari's stepfather rather than his mother, and notes that Ari has been overheard arguing with his mother on the phone about his stepfather's whereabouts. The counselor asks if Ari's mother suffers from depression, or if his stepfather has left home. All Ari can do is laugh, saying the counselor has everything wrong. Ari then abruptly leaves the meeting.

You Do What You Have to Do: Daniel, Brooklyn, 1986 – Daniel heads into a thrift shop and begins looking through the inventory. The three sisters who run the place ask Daniel if he has found anything else belonging to his mother, for he has been in there for several days looking for belongings of his mother's that his father got rid of. One of the sisters explains that grief takes many forms. Daniel thinks of writing a letter to Nicola, knowing he needs her to come and save him from everything. He decides to call Nicola's house, but Todd answers. This startles Daniel, who hangs up. Daniel is then arrested for having stolen from the thrift store. His oldest sister comes to bail him out.

When All the Tiny Lights Begin to Be Extinguished: Daniel, Paris, 2010 – Daniel explains directly to the reader that it is impossible to lie to Claudette, because Claudette is always able to figure out the truth. He decides to head to Paris, believing this is where she has gone, for she travels there two or three times a year despite it being a major trauma for her to even leave the valley in Ireland. In Paris, he calls Claudette's mother's apartment, Pascalaine, and asks to speak to Claudette. Claudette tells him to go fuck himself after he asks to meet her.



Ari, Calvin, and Marithe arrive as scheduled, but Claudette does not come. Ari tells Daniel he is in a lot of trouble with Claudette. Ari lights up a cigarette against Daniel's protests. Ari asks if Daniel is seeing someone else. Daniel denies this. Ari explains it is what Claudette thinks is happening. It is then that Claudette angrily arrives. Daniel explains his trip to Claudette, including the radio program and Nicola Janks. Claudette is instantly forgiving, though she is not happy about Daniel sleeping with another girl after Nicola getting an abortion.

Down the Line: Nicola and Daniel, London, 1986 – Daniel and Nicola meet at a café. He asks her how her BBC interview went that morning, Nicola herself wonders if it has been wise to schedule both the interview and the abortion on the same day, but remembers feeling pleasure at being so organized about it. Daniel asks Nicola if they are doing the right thing with the abortion, and even says they could keep the baby. Nicola refuses to entertain the conversation, then goes to the clinic. There, she begins to have second thoughts, telling the anesthesiologist at the last moment she has changed her mind, but by then, the anesthesia is already putting her to sleep.

And Who Are You?: Niall, Donegal, 2013 – Niall thinks about how his sister reassured him of his fears that she and the family would suddenly vanish one day without him. He hikes his way through the Irish countryside, navigating his way by map. He finds the house he believes belongs to his father, but is told by Marithe that Daniel does not live there anymore, but now lives in London. Niall introduces himself as Daniel's son, from America. Marithe runs to grab her cousin, Zhilan, who is interested in meeting Niall, but confirms Daniel lives in London. He begins thinking of Phoebe and starts crying. He remembers how just a short time before, his sister went out to buy lip gloss when she was killed. Claudette brings Niall inside, and gives him some tea. She tells Niall to stay as long as he wants, that he is very welcome there.

Absolutely the Right Tree: Claudette and Daniel, Donegal and London, 2013 – Claudette is home alone for the first time, for the children have gone to visit Daniel in London under Niall's supervision. She feels strange without anyone else in the house, and worries for the safety of all of them. Claudette tries to focus on her fury with Daniel, not knowing whether to consider him her estranged husband or her ex-husband. Daniel, meanwhile, has been devastated by Phoebe's death. He is taking some homeopathic pills, but he does not know what their effect will be.

Daniel goes food shopping and, taking a break, realizes all he has in his cart are an apple, a can of tuna, and a bottle of vodka. He thinks about his failed marriage, about how a few months after coming back from Paris, Daniel ignored Claudette in bed beside him, prompting her to ask if he thought they had reached the end of their story. Meanwhile, Claudette remembers the first time she met Daniel as she walks along a beach, and she begins crying. She pulls out her phone and considers calling him. She calls her mom instead, who reminds her that Daniel is now an alcoholic, and not the man he used to be. Daniel, meanwhile, considers that Phoebe's death might be judgment and payback for his past. Claudette, at the same time, begins planning to fix up and refinish the house. She finally decides to call Daniel, but Daniel misses the call and goes to bed.



Analysis

Physical distance is not emotional or mental distance, Maggie O'Farrell continues to argue. Claudette may have gone to Paris, but Daniel's heart is still with her. He follows her all the way to Paris, where his love –and the bonds of family (his love for his children) are so great that he reveals the truth of his past and the truth of his visit to Sussex. Claudette is both forgiving and unforgiving of this given the details involved – but clearly, there has been a rupture of trust and love between the two. Claudette certainly never envisioned this as a part of her future in the present when she married Daniel in the past, but now she is forced to deal with the situation as it is, rather than what she thought it was. Future events, such as Phoebe's death, are now past, and the past retains a powerful hold on the present. Claudette and Daniel are no longer together, and Daniel is an alcoholic. His life has spiraled out of control – something he would have never thought possible in his past.

The reader should note that again, O'Farrell returns to themes of not knowing what the future will bring. Of particular note are two scenes: Maeve with Claudette in China adopting a baby girl; and Ari being cautioned against his relationship with a girl at school. These scenes lay the groundwork for future events, but what these events are will only be revealed in the fullness of time. Both events will prove to be essential to the story ahead. At the same time, Daniel had long suspected, though hoped against, the idea that Claudette could one day disappear from him. He is only just recovering a relationship with his two estranged American children, and now he stands the very real possibility he may lose his Irish-born children thanks to Claudette. Family is an immensely powerful thing, and this much is clear in Daniel's decision to pursue Claudette to Paris.

Daniel has always been family-oriented, and it is revealed that he attempted to talk Nicola out of the abortion before she had it. Nicola herself had last-second thoughts about the procedure, though by then she was under anesthesia and the clinic workers did not listen to her. It is not clear if Daniel ever knew this, but the reader does; this knowledge makes the rupture in their relationship due to the abortion all the more tragic, because it is indeed possible that Nicola actually wanted to keep the baby. This in turn makes a strong relationship with all of his children even more important to Daniel. He may not have been able to have an ultimate effect on the life of his first child, but he is determined to do right by all of the children thereafter.

Discussion Question 1

How does Nicola's abortion come to affect Daniel in the future, especially with respect to wanting a relationship with his children? Do you believe that Nicola's abortion, tragic though it was, and especially with Daniel opposing it, actually helped Daniel's sense of family in the future? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

How does Phoebe's death come to affect Daniel? What does this mean for his relationship with Claudette, his children and others? Why is Daniel unable to more quickly move past, or more competently handle the death of Phoebe?

Discussion Question 3

Although Claudette is forgiving of Daniel for his lengthy trip away from her and the children, she is less forgiving about Daniel having an affair after Nicola's abortion. Why is this so? Are Daniel's actions at all justifiable? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

blasé, opined, expounding, existentialism, tedious, semantic, mirthless, opprobrium, unperturbed, feeble, contention, cauterize, detritus, quizzical, incongruous, singsong, tessellated, enumerates, oblivious, oscillating, inscrutable, sinuous, obfuscatory, homeopathic, weft



An Unexpected Outcome - For Dear Life

Summary

An Unexpected Outcome: Transcript of Interview Between Timou Lindstrom and a Journalist for the London Courier: Dalsland, Sweden, 2014 – A journalist visits Timou at his summer cabin to ask about Timou's work, noting that Timou's last film came out 11 years before, but he is now working on a television show that will be shown in the U.K. and the U.S. The journalist also asks about Claudette leaving Timou, but Timou says the journalist represents the synecdoche of what Claudette ran away from. Timou is angry about having to talk about the subject of Claudette, as he has been asked about it relentlessly over the years. The journalist asks if Timou knew Claudette was planning to disappear, to which Timou responds that you cannot be someone's almost-wife and not know something like that. The journalist asks if Timou and Claudette are in touch, but Timou refuses to answer. Eventually, he admits he knows where she is, but refuses to say where.

To Hang On, to Never Let Go: Lucas, London, 2014 – Lucas goes to Daniel's place and knocks. He hears movement within, but Daniel does not reply right away. Lucas invites Daniel out for coffee. Instead, Daniel invites Lucas in. Daniel's apartment is a mess. Daniel knows Lucas has come to see him for a reason, and Lucas confesses he has divorce papers with him. Daniel wants to know how Lucas can stand to be bossed around by Claudette all the time. Daniel says that Claudette's entire existence is based on Lucas doing as he is told. Daniel says it must be because Claudette bought him off by paying for fertility treatments and the adoption. Lucas becomes enraged and tells Daniel to leave his daughter out of this. Daniel apologizes but becomes enraged when Lucas looks around the apartment. Daniel furiously tells Lucas to tell Claudette his compassionate leave became termination, that he has a restraining order against him from Todd, and that he is still fixated on Nicola. He is enraged that Niall is close with Claudette now, but Lucas reminds Daniel it was Daniel who drew the map to get Niall to Claudette's place. Lucas explains Claudette wants the divorce to be amicable, and is willing to give him money and visitation. Daniel says he does not want any money. Lucas tells Daniel he needs to fight his way through his state of being and be a father to his children.

Always to Be Losing Things: Rosalind, Bolivia, 2015 – Rosalind and a tour group are making their way by truck to the Salar de Uyuni, a salt desert in the Bolivian Altiplano. She sits beside a tall, American man with glasses. He appears to be searching for something on himself, then finds it – his passport. The man explains he is traveling with his son, Niall, who works as a scientist in New York, who is in Bolivia to study seismology in the region. Rosalind reflects on how her own husband cheated on her repeatedly, even having another child. Niall's father explains to Rosalind later that Niall says the Salar de Uyuni is the purest place on Earth, in terms of chemical elements being unadulterated. Niall's father asks Rosalind for her story, but she does not want to talk about it. The man introduces himself as Daniel. He reveals he is taking pills that will



make him violently ill if he drinks alcohol. It is part of his treatment to be sober, he explains. Taking the pills is also a promise to his ex-wife and Niall. Rosalind goes on to think about her own husband, who accused her of overreacting to his affairs. She wonders what her life will have in store for her now. She comes to notice that Niall is very much like Daniel in some respects, and very different in others. Rosalind tells Daniel that if he wants his ex-wife back, he needs to fight for her, noting that life comes to everyone but once. Rosalind encourages him to have the courage to do what he must, and to remember to take his pills. Rosalind's own life and what she will do, she says, is another story.

Gold-Hatted, High-Bouncing Lover: Ari, Calvin, and Marithe, Belfast, 2016 – Twenty-two-year-old Ari and his daughter, five year-old Zoe, are at the zoo at Regent's Park. They are up north visiting his family. Zoe is the product of a broken condom during sex with a Catholic girl while Ari was still in school, and the girl refusing to have an abortion because of her faith. Zoe is especially taken with cheetahs. Marithe, Claudette, and Calvin are also at Regent's. It is then that Daniel arrives, having been secretly invited by Ari. Claudette seems annoyed by Daniel's presence, but Ari can see she is quietly happy to see him. Marithe, meanwhile, reflects on finding out the truth behind how her mother came to be in Ireland, including the staged disappearance. Marithe very much hopes that things will work out between her mother and her father.

For Dear Life: Daniel, Donegal, 2016 – Daniel visits the house in Donegal, and confirms to Marithe that she and the others will again be coming to visit him in New York the following month even though he has come to visit Ireland. Marithe asks to see the High Line again, and Daniel agrees to this. She also asks Daniel if he is still sad about Phoebe. He explains he will always be sad about Phoebe, but can be happy about other good things in his life.

Daniel later finds Claudette in the Time Capsule, a small alcove-like room with an old wood-burning stove in it that Claudette never changed or refinished. There, he helps her to remove a ratty, old carpet. He also confirms he is still sober and doing well. Daniel also spends some time moving out boxes of his old possessions. Daniel also apologizes for what became of their marriage, and how he acted during the marriage. Claudette asks for a cigarette, but Daniel explains he quit. Claudette then asks him to come back to her and stay in the house once more. Daniel agrees to this.

Analysis

No one knows what the future will bring; this is entirely clear by the end of the novel. The reader will recall two important scenes from previous chapters. First, the reader will recall Ari being cautioned about his relationships at school. Second, the reader will recall Maeve and Claudette adopting a baby girl. Years later, Daniel will challenge Lucas's obedience to Claudette with the contention – wrong and apologized for – that Lucas has been paid off with Claudette's help in adopting a baby. Lucas could never have imagined his desire to be a father would be wielded as a weapon against him based on Daniel's anger toward Claudette. Meanwhile, Ari's relationship leads to the girl



becoming pregnant and choosing to have the child as a matter of faith and conviction. Because of this, Ari and the family gather at the zoo – and outing to which he invites his father, and a situation which would never have been possible without Ari's baby being born. Physical distance is not emotional or mental distance, argues Maggie O'Farrell as Daniel comes to the zoo. It is clear his life in New York, thousands of miles away, has not been enough to dampen his love for Claudette, or his desire to be with his children.

Indeed, the bonds of family remain immensely strong as the novel comes to a close. Daniel is willing to face down the prospect that he may never again be with Claudette in order to be brave and see his children, taking the great length to actually visit her house. The past continues to have a powerful hold on the present, not only for Daniel, but for Claudette as well. With Daniel having cleaned himself up and having remained sober, Claudette sees in him the man she once saw in him – and decides she wants him back. It is already clear Daniel wants Claudette back. This is to be taken in conjunction with two very important scenes: the first with Rosalind, who tells Daniel that life is a one-time gift and must not be wasted (meaning that Daniel must try to make things right with the woman he loves); and the emotional affair his mother had with Johnny, as both of their lives were full of regrets of untaken chances. The same fate, however, will not be repeated by Daniel and Claudette.

Discussion Question 1

Ari invites his father to the zoo when he knows his mother and siblings will be there. Why does he do this? Why does he seem to have an interest in Claudette and Daniel being together?

Discussion Question 2

Despite the difficulty between Daniel and Claudette, Daniel is still willing to deal with her in order to see his children. Why is this so? What is it so important for Daniel especially given the past (both Rosalind's urging and Johnny's example)?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe Claudette ultimately decides that she wants Daniel back despite everything that has happened? What is Daniel's answer to her offer of letting him stay? Why?

Vocabulary

formulaic, synecdoche, fossicking, inaudible, laconic, fug, predicated, dilapidated, fecund, bespectacled, inadvertent, emphatic, bluntly, portmanteau, sacrilegious, envisage, vestigial, incriminating, hoity-toity, superlative, cavalier



Characters

Daniel Sullivan

Daniel is a Brooklyn-born American who marries Claudette Wells and moves in with her in northern Ireland. Daniel is a kind, thoughtful, and very family-oriented man haunted by the death of Nicola Janks, his former lover, and the abortion she had against his pleading. This deeply upsets Daniel and leads to how important his later children are to him. Daniel is the father of Niall and Phoebe (children from his first marriage which ended in mutual infidelity) and Marithe and Calvin by Claudette, with Ari being a stepson.

Daniel travels to New York in the novel to confront his past, reconnect with his American children, and to learn about Nicola's fate. Years later, Phoebe's accidental death traumatizes Daniel, who spirals into alcoholism. Promising both Claudette and Niall he will get sober, Daniel makes a conscious effort to, and succeeds in getting clean. Though estranged and heading toward divorce with Claudette, he still loves her. At the end of the novel, he and Claudette reunite romantically.

Claudette Sullivan

Claudette is the English-born, half-French wife of Daniel, and is a reclusive movie actress who staged her own death in order to get away from the public and have a quiet family life. Claudette is constantly worried that the past will creep up on her and destroy her present life, where she lives with her son Ari (had with former lover and director Timou Lindstrom), and her children with Daniel, Calvin and Marithe. Claudette suspects Daniel of cheating on her when he heads to the States, but is forgiving when he confesses the truth of everything that went on during the trip. Claudette ultimately pulls away from Daniel when he spirals into alcoholism and seems to stop caring about the marriage, but remains in love - though angry - with him until they reunite romantically at the end of the novel.

Timou Lindstrom

Timou is an experimental filmmaker and director who discovered, dated, and helped make Claudette famous. In the present, Timou is famous and wealthy, having broken into the mainstream. Timou is haunted by Claudette's sudden disappearance from his life with their son, though he is fully aware of where she and his son are. Timou, despite his heartbreak over the past, lovingly and determinedly defends her secret whereabouts and refuses to speak much about her disappearance in interviews.



Lucas Wells

Lucas is the brother of Claudette, the husband of Maeve, and the adoptive father of Zhilan. Lucas is a kind, thoughtful, and honest person who helps protect his sister when she goes into seclusion. Lucas later helps encourage Daniel to straighten up his life, get sober and clean, and to be an active part of his children's lives again.

Niall Sullivan

Niall is the eldest son of Daniel. Niall is a kind, thoughtful, and fiercely intelligent young man who works in seismology and who has had a lifelong battle with eczema. Niall and Daniel, estranged due to the actions of Niall's mother, spend much of the novel getting close again. They ultimately beginning a close father-son relationship in the end.

Phoebe Sullivan

Phoebe is the eldest daughter of Daniel. Phoebe is morally-conscious, incredibly kind, and looks up to her brother, Niall. Phoebe, upon learning of the reason why her father has not been in touch with her, commits to reestablishing a relationship with him. She and Daniel become very close as father and daughter until Phoebe's accidental death when she runs out to buy lip gloss. Her death serves to push Daniel over the edge into depression and alcoholism.

Todd

Todd is the former roommate and friend of Daniel from college in London. Todd, who seemingly has romantic inclinations toward Nicola, intercepts Daniel's letter to Nicola, preventing her from reestablishing a relationship with Daniel. Todd admits almost as much to Daniel three decades later, after the two have not spoken since Daniel returned to America and stayed.

Nicola Janks

Nicola was a celebrity intellectual and one of the first female engineers in the United Kingdom. By the time of the novel, she has been dead for some 30 years, having died of a weak heart brought on by frequent bouts with anorexia.

Nicola, though much older than Daniel, begins a relationship with him that leads to her becoming pregnant and choosing to have an abortion despite Daniel wanting to keep the baby. However, Nicola's last-minute second thoughts go unheeded by the abortionist, and the abortion itself creates a rift between Nicola and Daniel. Nicola later finds Daniel having an affair, and the two break up. Nicola's anorexia returns after Daniel leaves for America and never gets in touch with her as promised (though she



does not know Todd has intercepted the correspondence) and so she falls back into anorexia until her death several months later.

Ari

Ari is the son of Claudette and Timou. Suffering from a speech impediment that improves with age, Ari is very kind, very intelligent, and very unorthodox. He comes to have a baby with a girl at school when he is 17. Ari later recognizes that love still exists between his mother and Daniel, whom he greatly admires, and he helps orchestrate their getting back together.

Marithe

Marithe is the daughter of Daniel and Claudette. She is gentle, thoughtful, and very family-oriented. She is heartbroken when Daniel spirals out of control over Phoebe's death, but becomes one of the reasons he is able to focus on being happy once more. She is likewise hopeful that Daniel and Claudette will reunite for good at the end of the novel.



Symbols and Symbolism

Guns

Guns are symbolic of Claudette's desire to keep the past away. Claudette stalks around her property with a gun, randomly firing it off to discourage anyone who might be lurking beyond the fence or elsewhere on the property. She fears being discovered and made the center of a media firestorm that will plunge her back into the public eye.

Radio Announcement

A radio announcement regarding the death of Nicola Janks is symbolic of how relevant the past remains in Daniel's life. Daniel is unsettled by the announcement, which in turn troubles him because he fears he has caused her death. Because of this, he alters his trip to America to include a few days in London to look up Todd to find out what really happened to Nicola.

Claudette's Temp Job

A temp job is reflective of the temporary phases of Claudette's life. Claudette takes a temp job at the Film Society, which in turn transforms into full-time employment, which in turn puts her in touch with Timou who coaxes her into doing film. Each temporary job is a temporary phase in life – just as Timou himself becomes a temporary phases in Claudette's life.

Experimental Films

Experimental films represent pushing the boundary. The films themselves blur boundaries between actors and directors, but the experimental films also come to push boundaries between life and staged events for Claudette. Claudette will come to regard her own disappearance as a kind of a live experimental film in which only she knows the ending.

Claudette's Staged Disappearance

Claudette's staged disappearance signifies her intense desire to get out of the public eye at all cost. Claudette, though she at one point enjoyed acting, no longer does because of the media circus and constant public attention. Claudette longs for a quiet family life, so she abruptly cuts herself out of the world by staging her disappearance for a clean break and a clean start-over.



Claudette's Disappearance From Daniel

Claudette's disappearance from Daniel is an example of irony. While Daniel long suspected Claudette could do such a thing, he does not expect it when it actually happens. Danielle had hoped that things with Claudette would be permanent, that he would be the culmination of what she had disappeared the first time for. But Claudette's disappearance is the exact opposite of what he had hoped for.

Interviews with Timou

Interviews with Timou represent Timou's loyalty and growing tiredness of the past. Each time Timou is interviewed, he is always asked about Claudette, and if he knows where Claudette is. Timou refuses to say, protecting her desire for privacy and safeguarding her whereabouts. Timou does such a thing in his latest interview in the novel.

Daniel's Grandfather's Ashes

Daniel's Grandfather's ashes represent both beginnings and endings. Daniel travels to Ireland to collect his grandfather's ashes, signifying the end of his life and the end of Daniel's relationship with him. It is because of the ashes that Daniel is in Ireland and meets Claudette, which signifies a new beginning with her.

Auction Satalogue

An auction catalogue demonstrates that, even years after her supposed death, Claudette is still very popular in the public mind. The auction catalogue features items associated with, or that belonged to, Claudette. These stand to fetch a high price, and prove that Claudette is right to be worried about being discovered in seclusion.

Daniel's Sobriety Promise

Daniel's promise is symbolic of Daniel's desire to get better and be a better man. The promise is made by Daniel to Claudette and Niall, and involves his getting clean and staying sober because he desperately wants to be a part of their lives again. The promise is made in conjunction with his taking anti-alcohol pills, which will make him violently ill if he drinks any alcohol.



Settings

Donegal

Donegal is the northwesternmost county in Ireland. It is the home of Daniel, Claudette, and their children, and serves to be one of the primary settings of the novel. Claudette first moves to Donegal because it is sparsely populated, and because it features a valley near the coast that is even more isolated, sparsely populated, and rural, ensuring her own anonymity and a quiet life she can live as she sees fit. She wants to live freely without being in the public eye, and Donegal is the perfect place for her to do so. Her family comes to love Donegal as well, with Daniel being so in love with Claudette and the place that he is willing to travel great distances to work, just for the sake of Claudette and his love of the land. Donegal also serves to be the location of the title of the novel, as when Daniel arrives at the place for the first time, he observes, "This must be the place" (229).

The Time Capsule

The Time Capsule is a small vestibule-like addition to the Donegal house where Daniel and Claudette live. It is notable for the wood-burning stove it features, and because it is the one part of the house that Claudette has never changed. In this way, the Time Capsule is reflective of Claudette's heart which, despite the changes in her life, remains the same beautiful heart it always was.

New York

New York is the hometown of Daniel, and where Daniel spends much of his life apart from Ireland. Daniel returns to New York for his father's birthday early in the novel, a trip which he also uses to fly out to see his children in California. After Daniel and Claudette become estranged, Daniel moves back to New York with the idea that he will come to live there. His children visit him frequently in New York, but Daniel ultimately leaves New York behind when he and Claudette get back together.

The Baltic Sea

The Baltic Sea, off the Stockholm Archipelago, is symbolic of ends and beginnings. It is the place where Claudette decides to stage the death of herself and her son to leave her old life behind and begin a new, peaceful, and quiet life in Ireland. The disappearance occurs when Claudette and baby Ari board a rowboat from the Lindstrom family yacht, and row to shore. Many people believe Claudette and her son are dead and in the sea, while others believe she simply disappeared but did not die.

Fresno

Fresno is the town in California where Niall and Phoebe live. It is where Daniel makes an impromptu visit to see his children, something he has not been able to do before. It is in Fresno that Daniel and his children realize their mother (his ex-wife) has been intercepting all of his correspondence to them to keep him out of their lives. After this visit to Fresno, Daniel and his children reconnect and grow steadily closer through the end of the novel.



Themes and Motifs

Physical distance is not emotional or mental distance

Physical distance is not emotional or mental distance, argues Maggie O'Farrell in *This Must Be the Place*. Just because someone physically gets away from something does not mean they are actually free of it. They can still be emotionally and mentally defined, influenced, or affected by it. This is certainly the case with respect to Daniel, Claudette, and other minor characters in the novel.

For Claudette, she lives daily with the knowledge of who she once was, and how she was always in the public eye as an actress. She has moved to Donegal for a quiet, family life outside of the public purview. Yet on a daily basis, Claudette fears being rediscovered and igniting a media firestorm which will plunge her back into the limelight. Even though she is miles and miles away physically from her past life, she is not emotionally or mentally distant from the anguish, stress, and difficulties it caused her - and continues to cause her.

Daniel, too, has sought to escape parts of his past life by living with Claudette in such a place. However, even the physical distance is not enough to separate him from emotional and mental difficulties – such as learning that Nicola Janks has been dead for so long. Likewise, just because Daniel is thousands of miles away from his children from his first marriage does not mean he is better equipped to deal with the distance between them emotionally and mentally. Daniel desperately wants to be a father to all of his children, but his children in California have not spoken with him in years (as it turns out, this is because of their mother, and has nothing to do with Daniel).

Other characters in the novel are also plagued by the lack of difference distance makes to them emotionally and mentally. Rosalind travels miles away from her husband to try to get her mind clear of his adultery and fathering children out of wedlock – but she cannot escape the emotional and mental hurt this causes her. Timou goes on with his career in film and spends much of his time at his summer retreat, hundreds of miles away from anyone else – but even here, he cannot escape the mental and emotional pain of the past, either through journalists' questions or his own aloneness.

The bonds of family are immensely strong

The bonds of family are immensely strong, argues Maggie O'Farrell in her novel *This Must Be the Place*. Family bonds – the love, loyalty, compassion, and support between family members – are to be found consistently throughout the novel. Wherever family bonds do appear, they are very strong, and always very positive.

Claudette has long wanted a quiet, family life, a longing awakened in her by the birth of her first son, Ari. Claudette's marriage to, and having children with Daniel, is a dream come true. Claudette is utterly devoted to her family, caring for them, and seeing to their



health and wellbeing. Claudette's entire world revolves around her family, because it is what she had as a child, and what she lacked as an adult in the movie industry.

Even her adult life reflects her love of family, as she depends on her brother Lucas for so much. Lucas himself helps Claudette however he can as a matter of familial love and loyalty. Lucas's own desire for a family leads Claudette to helping him and his wife adopt a child from China. Claudette also encourages Daniel to reestablish contact with his children from his first marriage, and is thrilled when he is finally able to do so. Claudette welcomes Daniel's children into the family as well, letting them know – especially Niall – they are always welcome and wanted.

Family is immensely important to Daniel as well, stemming back to Nicola's abortion. Daniel has always been family-oriented thanks to his mother's example and influence, but Nicola's abortion makes Daniel appreciate having children in ways like never before. It is why he flies thousands of miles out of his way for the chance to see his children from his first marriage for just a few moments – and why he and his children (who love Daniel just as much) quickly rebuild and grow their relationship. By the end of the novel, it is the children – including Ari and Marithe – who lay the groundwork for Daniel and Claudette to reunite romantically.

The past has a powerful hold on the present

The past has a powerful hold on the present, argues Maggie O'Farrell in her novel *This Must Be the Place*. The past, though it does not necessarily portend the future, largely defines who a person is in the present, either in part or in whole. In the novel, the past resonates with each of the characters encountered.

Claudette is consistently haunted by her past as an actress. Having come to hate life as the center of attention, constantly hounded by the media and the public, Claudette staged her own death to live a quiet life miles away from anyone else. Claudette is so determined to avoid being thrust back into the limelight that she carries and fires a gun repeatedly to scare anyone who might be lurking around the property trying to find out who she is. Having been cheated on by Timou, Claudette can only conclude that Daniel has cheated on her in the present during his trip to the States, and so she flees to her mother's in Paris.

Daniel himself is deeply haunted by the past. He is haunted by the knowledge that he may have been the cause of Nicola's death (though he later learns this is not true) and is deeply saddened by the abortion that she had many years before. Because of this, he becomes all the more committed to his children, and goes above and beyond for their sake – and is likewise devastated into a spiral of alcoholism and depression when Phoebe dies. Only by promising his wife and children he will get better, does Daniel actually get better.

Timou himself is deeply saddened by the past. His decision to go more mainstream with his films is primarily because Claudette has left him, and he no longer can rely on her



creativity. His decision to protect her location and life in the present is in large part a measure of repayment for the past –not only for his affairs, but for his forcing her into acting in the first place. Todd has gone on to have a life of relative obscurity as a teacher, for he is haunted by the past in his decision to intercept letters between Daniel and Nicola, and because his actions largely contributed to Nicola's death.

No one knows what the future will bring

No one knows what the future will bring, argues Maggie O'Farrell in her novel *This Must Be the Place*. This is made clear and apparent in two ways. First, this comes about by way of the twists and turns in the lives of characters they are not expecting. Second, this comes by way of the narrator interrupting the narrative to tell readers what is coming down the pike – things which the characters themselves do not know about until they happen.

When Claudette takes a temp job at the Film Society, she never imagines she will have a future as a famous actress. She never imagines then she will become so famous and so devoted to family that she will stage her own death. Even when she plans to, and does carry out the staged death, Claudette never expects to fall in love again. Claudette never imagines having to run away again after marrying Daniel and having children by him, but also never expects to suspect Daniel of cheating – or that he has had his own sordid path. She never imagines they will actually divorce, or reunite in the end.

Daniel never expects to gain the first date he does with Nicola, and never expects to have a relationship with her that will end in abortion and adultery. Likewise, he never expects that he will be cut off from contact with his children by his first wife, and never expects to randomly fly out to see them in California to reestablish contact with them. At the same time, he does not expect it so suddenly – though he does suspect it all along – that Claudette will disappear from their home in Ireland, and does not expect to be able to win her heart back by the end of the novel.

The narrator also proves to be a surprising reveler of the future to readers. The narrator provides important contextual information, as well as tips to the plot ahead, which strengthens the story but also demonstrates just how little people know about the future. For example, the narrator talks about how, after reuniting with Phoebe, Daniel does not know she will be accidentally killed in several years. Elsewhere, the narrator notes that Claudette does not know she will, in a few years, stage her own death in order to get away from the public. In addition to several other instances, the narrator notes that Niall, as a child, does not realize he will remember one of his treatment visits with his father as one of the last memories he has of Daniel before Daniel disappears from his life.

The mind is a powerful thing

The mind is a powerful thing, argues Maggie O'Farrell in her novel *This Must Be the Place*. The mind is capable of thinking too much about things, or drawing either completely accurate or completely wrong conclusions about the present based on the



past or current events. That the mind is so powerful is demonstrated repeatedly through the novel in the actions and thoughts of characters.

The idea that the mind is a powerful thing is given vocalization by Daniel when he says “The mind is a powerful, persuasive tool: we all know that,” (273). Here, he is referring to Claudette incorrectly concluding he had an affair while away in the States. He attributes this to Claudette’s own concerns about her past, especially regarding the many affairs Timou seemingly had. It is only natural that someone cheated on once could suspect cheating again and again.

Claudette’s own past – primarily her disappearance – comes from a movie she films in her mind where she disappears from public and raises a quiet family and has a quiet life. What her mind envisions, Claudette carries out. This proves the mind is very powerful. At the same time, Claudette has gained a very acute, very accurate sense of understanding given her acting abilities and her study of body language based on that acting – and so she can tell when Daniel is withholding parts of his trip from her, which in turn leads her to wrongly conclude that Daniel is cheating on her.

In her present life, Claudette’s mind circles around her public past, and so in the present, out of fear of the past catching up to her, Claudette fires a gun randomly around her property to scare anyone who might be searching for her or spying on her. While there is literally no one doing this, Claudette’s mind – powerful – is made up. When Daniel spirals, it is his resolve in his mind based on the promise he makes to Claudette and Niall that he will clean himself up. By relying on the power of his mind by way of his promise, Daniel is indeed able to clean himself up.



Styles

Point of View

Maggie O'Farrell tells her novel *This Must Be the Place* in the omniscient-limited first and omniscient third-person narrative mode, depending on the chapter and character involved. The majority of the novel is told in the third-person narrative mode by an unknown narrator, who knows about all events, including those in the future. The third-person narrator often interrupts the narrative itself to tell readers about future events, given the reader an intimate and privileged God's-eye view of things to come. This is done for at least two reasons. First, it contextualizes the story and helps to fill in missing pieces for the reader so that the story can more easily be understood. Second, it demonstrates that people simply do not know what lies ahead in the future – and underscores the theme in the novel that no one knows what the future will bring. Daniel also serves as the first-person narrator for certain chapters involving himself – though he does not narrate all chapters involving himself.

This is seemingly done for similar reasons to the third-person narrator: the reader is given intimate glimpses of Daniel's past for the purposes of relevance and context, things which no one else would know about. Claudette does not narrate her own sections, for her refusal to be under the public eye means she would never address readers personally or directly; thus, the narrator must sketch out Claudette's life, thoughts, emotions, and circumstances.

Language and Meaning

Maggie O'Farrell tells her novel *This Must Be the Place* in language that is contemplative, reflective, and incisive whether Daniel or the third-person narrator are telling the story. This is done for several reasons. First, the book deals with important themes ranging from not knowing what the future will bring, to the way the past matters so profoundly in the present. It is only natural then that the language used be reflective in such a way. For example, consider Daniel's reflecting on needing to speak to Todd about Nicola and the past, "This man, though, has what I want. He holds the key to what happened. He is the only one I can ask: this is my only chance of finding out. If I blow this, that's it. I will never know" (193). Daniel is very concerned with the past, and his language reflects on needing to know about the past. Daniel is pensive, thoughtful, and very cautious in considering how to handle things.

Second, the book deals with themes of emotional and mental distress caused by the present and by the past, and the idea that no physical distance may overcome them. Consider Claudette's initial thoughts about staging her disappearance in which the narrator explains that, "She reflects then, and only for a moment, on the film she is rowing away from. Half-made it is, half-realized, as yet in that state where it has the potential for perfection, for something outside their reach" (210). It is only natural that



Claudette should be reflective of the past and what the future might bring – and that the language should reflect that.

Finally, the contemplative language helps O’Farrell to make clear and poignant claims. For example, consider Rosalind’s thoughts, “Life comes to us but once, Daniel” (350). In simple, reflective language, O’Farrell reminds readers not to waste their lives.

Structure

Maggie O’Farrell divides her novel *This Must Be the Place* into 28 unnumbered, titled chapters in a nonlinear format. Each chapter bears the title of a phrase, character quote, or specific piece of narration contained in that chapter related to the overall events of the chapter itself. For example, the chapter “The Strangest Feeling in My Legs” references the last thing Daniel’s grandfather says before dying. Each chapter is devoted primarily to events surrounding one character (though a few chapters involve two or more characters), who is denoted in the title of the chapter. For example, the chapter “I Am Not an Actress: Claudette” deals with Claudette’s induction into the acting world. Each chapter itself is narrated either in third person, or by Daniel (depending on the chapter). Likewise, each chapter leapfrogs back and forth through time, with the years going as far back as 1944, and as far ahead as 2016. The weaving back and forth through time creates a kaleidoscopic effect of events, people, and places, and like a puzzle as the puzzle is filled in piece by piece. This also allows a multigenerational element, in which the parents, grandparents, children, and assorted family members of Daniel and Claudette contribute their lives and influence to the overall story.



Quotes

But I'm not an actress.

-- Claudette (I Am Not an Actress)

Importance: Claudette recalls her own past, and her entry into acting. She remembers working at the Film Society in London, a job that routinely brought her into contact with famous actors and directors. It was there she met writer-director Timou Lindstrom, who first encouraged her to go into acting, and to act in his upcoming film.

"Where did you go?' I'm yelling. 'What happened? How could you leave like that? Why haven't you come before?

-- Phoebe (It's Really Very Simple)

Importance: When Daniel returns to New York for his father's birthday, he decides to head out to California to see his children. When he arrives, he gets together with them for dinner. Phoebe ultimately lashes out, demanding to know where and why Daniel has gone from their lives.

It's just a house,' she says, and breaks away from his gaze, walking toward the window. 'In case I ever needed to... get away. It would be somewhere to come, somewhere to be. Just for a while.

-- Claudette (Something Only He Can See)

Importance: As Claudette's fame increases, Claudette's unhappiness and desire for quiet and privacy also increase. She purchases a run-down farm house in the middle of nowhere in northern Ireland, and invites her brother and his wife to come and see her there. She signs over legal guardianship of her baby to them, saying it would help her to get away if she ever needed to.

That you won't do anything without telling me. That you won't disappear and leave me to wonder or –

-- Lucas (Something Only He Can See)

Importance: When Claudette lays out the groundwork for her ability to disappear, her brother is understandably concerned. He tells her not to disappear, or do anything without telling him first. He does not want to have to wonder what has become of her if she decides she needs the quiet.

This man, though, has what I want. He holds the key to what happened. He is the only one I can ask: this is my only chance of finding out. If I blow this, that's it. I will never know.

-- Daniel (The Tired Mind is a Stovetop)

Importance: Daniel goes to see his old friend, Todd, about Nicola's death. It is one piece of his life that has always remained unsettled. At first, Todd is angry because it



has been nearly 30 years since he and Daniel have seen one another, so Daniel is placating at first. But then Todd confesses to never having delivered Daniel's letter inviting Nicola to join him in Berkeley, which in turn led Nicola to continuing to starve herself for fear of not being wanted and eventually dying of a weakened heart. This enrages Todd, though it closes the door on one part of his life.

She reflects then, and only for a moment, on the film she is rowing away from. Half-made it is, half-realized, as yet in that state where it has the potential for perfection, for something outside their reach.

-- Narrator (Oxidized Copper Exactly)

Importance: Here, the narrator speaks of the thoughts Claudette has while staging her death and Ari's death by rowing away from the Lindstrom family yacht. She realizes her life with Timou is like a half-finished film, but she is stopping the film before the ending can be known. By leaving, Claudette ensures the ending is out of reach. She will begin work on a new film – a new life – in Ireland now.

Claudette has gone. She has taken the kids. She has pulled off her specialty... And I am left alone, discarded, steeped in the knowledge that it is entirely my fault. I am, in short, Timou Lindstrom the Second.

-- Daniel (The Dark Oubliettes of the House)

Importance: When Daniel returns home from his trip, he is very happy at first. However, he discovers the house is completely empty, even of the dogs. He realizes this can only mean that Claudette has run off with the children, just as she ran off with Ari from Timou. Daniel is stunned and devastated.

This must be the place.

-- Daniel (The Dark Oubliettes of the House)

Importance: When Daniel comes to Claudette's home in Ireland for the first time, he expresses as a statement and a conversation starter that it must be the place. Daniel is taken by the beauty and isolation of the place, and by how well he gets along with Ari and Claudette so quickly. Little does Daniel know, his statement of this being the place will come to affect his life dramatically, for it will be the place he comes to marry, live, and raise children with Claudette.

The mind is a powerful, persuasive tool: we all know that.

-- Daniel (When All the Tiny Lights Begin to Be Extinguished)

Importance: Claudette and Daniel meet up again in Paris after Claudette has left home. There, Daniel explains everything about his trip, including the radio program and Nicola Janks. He explains his mind ran off in a thousand different directions, and that the trip was about getting to the truth – not only about why he has been out of touch with his oldest children, but as to what actually happened to Nicola. Claudette is instantly forgiving.



Do you think, Daniel, that we have reached the end of our story?
-- Claudette (Absolutely the Right Tree)

Importance: A few months after Claudette and Daniel move back in together, Daniel begins ignoring Claudette. In bed one night ignoring her, Claudette asks Daniel if he thinks they have reached the end of their story. Daniel does not respond – and comes to regret it for years afterward.

Life comes to us but once, Daniel.
-- Rosalind (Always to Be Losing Things)

Importance: When Daniel meets Rosalind on the trip to Bolivia, Rosalind realizes that Daniel is still in love with Claudette. She gives him advice that comes with age – that life is not meant to be wasted because life only comes around once. Because of this, Daniel should not hesitate to declare his love for Claudette, and seek to win her heart back.

Yes,' I say. 'I am.
-- Daniel (For Dear Life)

Importance: At the very end of the novel, Daniel and Claudette realize they are still in love with one another. Claudette invites Daniel to come back and be with her. He agrees to do so while they are talking outside. When she heads in, she asks him if he is coming – not just inside, but coming back to stay for good. Daniel responds that he is.