

READING GROUP GUIDE

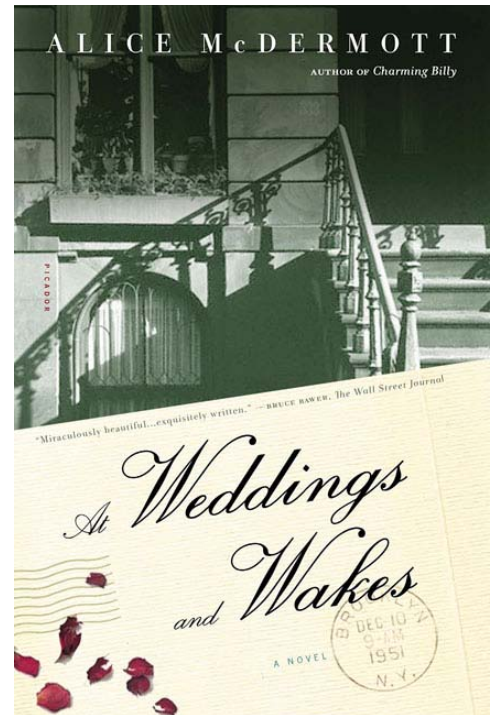
At Weddings and Wakes

A Novel

by Alice McDermott

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *At Weddings and Wakes* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *At Weddings and Wakes*.

About the Book

Lucy Dailey leaves suburbia twice a week with her three children in tow, returning to the Brooklyn home where she grew up, and where her stepmother and unmarried sisters still live. The children quietly observe Aunt Veronica, who drowns her sorrows in drink. Aunt Agnes, a caustic career woman, and finally Aunt May, the ex-nun, blossoming with a late and unexpected love, dutifully absorbing the legacy of their less-than-perfect family. Alice McDermott beautifully evokes three generations of an Irish-American family in this "haunting and masterly work of literary art" (*The Wall Street Journal*).

About the Author

Alice McDermott is the author of six novels. Her articles, reviews and stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Yorker*, *Redbook* and elsewhere.

Discussion Questions

1. Alice McDermott's prose has been praised for the sheer precision of its imagery, such as the subway journey in the opening sequence that recalls long-gone wicker seats and tokens embossed with a figure reminiscent of a peace sign. Did the book inspire vivid memories of your own past? Which precise images evoke long-lost worlds?
2. What is the effect of the children's point of view in *At Weddings and Wakes*? What matters to children versus to adults? What do Lucy's children comprehend better than the grown-ups do?
3. What does Momma teach her stepdaughters about the role of women in the world? What did it take to be considered a successful woman among other women of her generation?
4. What do the scenes of Catholic school, such as Margaret's bringing cemetery flowers to Sister Joan, indicate about a young child's needs in the classroom? What were Sister Miriam Joseph's aspirations in becoming a nun? Do those dreams seem fulfilled by her work as a teacher?
5. In what way did the two settings—suburbia and city—serve as a metaphor for other divisions within the novel? Would you have sided with the characters who decried the new suburbs? How does Lucy's suburban life compare to her Brooklyn home?
6. How does Lucy's husband cope with his memories of serving as a soldier in Europe? How did he reconcile the terror of the German pilot with the difficulties of civilian life after the war?
7. What traits does Fred share with May? In what way do their family experiences give them a means for understanding one another?
8. How did Momma adapt to her role as stepparent? How does her approach to parenting compare to Lucy's?
9. How would you characterize the interactions of Bobby, Margaret, and Maryanne? How do these siblings grow and change throughout the novel, particularly as spring sets in and Margaret embarks on an early-morning Lenten ritual with Bobby?
10. Who has the happiest relationships in the novel? Is fate or temperament the bigger factor in whether the characters experience bitterness?
11. The book's title is referred to when Rosemary asks, "Aren't you glad that you only have to see your relatives at weddings and wakes?" What determines which relatives we remain close to, and which ones we scorn or avoid? To what extent is allegiance or estrangement permanent across generations?

12. We are told that Veronica was named “for the saint who the nuns said was without vanity, who touched the bloodied face of Christ with her veil.” Did Veronica fulfill the legacy of her namesake?

13. What accounts for Agnes’s approach to living? Is she simply materialistic, or does she see herself as upholding a necessary standard? Did she and May have an advantage, having known their parents for an albeit brief span of time in their childhood?

14. What led May from the convent to the secular world, and ultimately to marriage? Was she a better candidate for marriage than her sisters were?

15. What distinguishes the family depicted in this novel from others appearing in Alice McDermott’s work? In what way does *At Weddings and Wakes* add new facets of love and fate to her storytelling?

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