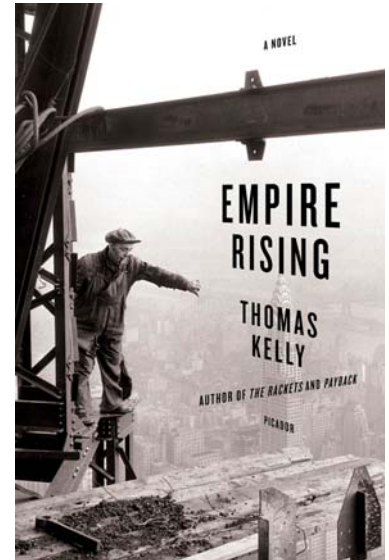


READING GROUP GUIDE

Empire Rising

A Novel

by Thomas Kelly



ISBN: 0-312-42574-0

About this Guide

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

About the Book

In *Empire Rising*, Thomas Kelly tells a story of love and work, of intrigue and betrayal, with the storytelling verve that led one reviewer to dub him “Dostoevsky with a hard hat and lead pipe.”

As the novel opens, it is 1930, and ground has just been broken for the Empire State Building, which rises during the book as if heedless to the Depression that surrounds it. One of the thousands of men working high above the city is Michael Briody, an Irish immigrant torn between his desire to make a new life in America and his pledge to gather money and arms for the Irish republican cause. When he meets Grace Masterson, an alluring artist who is depicting the great skyscraper’s rise from her houseboat on the East River, Briody’s life suddenly turns exhilarating—and dangerous, for Grace is also a paramour of Johnny Farrell, Mayor Jimmy Walker’s liaison with Tammany Hall and the underworld. Their story—an urban thriller which

takes place both in the immigrant neighborhoods of the South Bronx and amidst the swanky nightlife of the “21” Club—is also a chronicle of the city’s rough passage from a working-class enclave to a world-class metropolis, and a vivid re-imagining of the conflict that pitted the Tammany Hall political machine and its popular mayor, Jimmy Walker, against the boundlessly ambitious Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

With *Payback* and *The Rackets*, Thomas Kelly has shown himself to be a master of the urban thriller. In *Empire Rising* he takes his work to a new level: in his telling of the story of the people who built the “eighth wonder of the world,” a legendary moment in New York history is brought thrillingly to life.

“An extraordinary thriller about the political gangsters, builders, and bullies who constructed the Empire State Building.”

—*Esquire*

“*Empire Rising* is everything a period novel should be.”

—*Time*

“There is a compelling muscularity to his work—the plots barrel along, the characters are wildly colorful.”

—Joe Klein, *The New York Times Book Review*

“An engaging book in the grand old realistic tradition, a gripping piece of national history, a nicely felt love story, that takes us into the building sites and busy streets . . . that becomes, because of Kelly’s convincing storytelling manner, every city.”

—Alan Cheuse, *Chicago Tribune*

“New York in 1930 shines through the pages with high resolution.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“With its rich characters, expert pacing, and pitch-perfect dialogue, *Empire Rising* ratchets Kelly’s work up a notch. . . . Cinematic in scope.”

—*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

“The poet-laureate of hard-hatted working stiff.”

—*Men’s Journal*

“Like Richard Price, Kelly isn’t interested in action for its own sake. Stories about crime are the means for understanding what makes cities tick. . . . In Kelly’s case, the ferocious struggle for survival has rarely seemed so entertaining.”

—Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

“Compelling . . . *Empire Rising* is a richly entertaining yarn.”

—*Dallas Morning News*

“The New York of Thomas Kelly’s imagination is a tumultuous, toxic Eden, teeming with great promises and fresh starts, pervasive and overpowering temptations and harsh punishment for

transgressors. But also with love stories and hardhat heroes . . . It is a tribute to Kelly's gifts for juggling that he makes them all fit into this sprawling, brawling circus of kiss-offs and payoffs."
—*Daily News* (New York)

About the Author

Thomas Kelly is the author of *The Rackets* and *Payback*. He worked as a sandhog and construction worker before attending Fordham and Harvard Universities and becoming a political operative for former New York City mayor David Dinkins. He lives in New York.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the title *Empire Rising* only refer to the construction of the Empire State Building, or does it mean something more? What are the ways in which it can be interpreted?
2. How are racial dynamics handled in the novel? How do they compare to and differ from modern dynamics in New York City?
3. What is at stake for each of the main characters in this novel? How do their individual losses connect or divide them? Do these losses motivate their actions and reactions?
4. How does the pacing of construction affect the pacing of the plot? How does it affect the characters' lives?
5. What is Grace's opinion of the city she lives in? What role does she play in perpetuating the corruption? Why doesn't she put an end to her relationship with Johnny Farrell when she has the chance? How do her choices affect the lives of the people near to her?
6. Michael Briody comes to New York as a soldier for the war back in Ireland. Can you identify a moment when his convictions change? What are the circumstances which result in his decision to stop fighting?
7. Is there a character in this novel who hasn't succumbed to the vice of the city?
8. Could Judge Joseph Force Crater be viewed as a metaphor for New York City during this period of its history?
9. In a novel whose characters are focused on the future, what function does memory serve? What part has the past played in making these characters what they are in their current lives?
10. How does modern day New York City, particularly its politics, compare with its depiction in the novel?

11. Are Grace and Michael sympathetic characters? Is Johnny Farrell? Is Judge Crater? Is there any point in the novel when your opinion changes?
12. The construction of the Empire State Building was meant to revive public support in the city and its government, as is narrated on page six: “There is fear in these men now, maybe for the first time ever, so they need this day, want the energy and optimism that the construction of this behemoth will take—want it all to rub off on them.” Do you think that this intention succeeded? Did the “empire rising” change the city? How so?
13. How is family depicted in the novel? Is there a difference in the way that family, as a moral institution, exists today?
14. Discuss Jack Egan. Who is he? Is his allegiance clear? Is he trustworthy?
15. The novel ends with Briody dead and Grace fleeing by ship. What do you think the author was saying by making this choice?

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