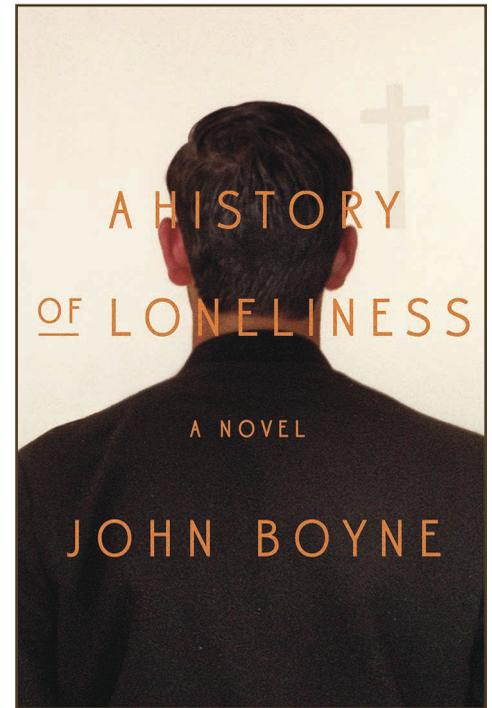


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

History of Loneliness *A Novel* by John Boyne



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Acclaimed for his stirring storytelling and keen perceptions of human nature, the novelist John Boyne now explores the turbulent cultural shifts that have marked Irish Catholicism in recent decades. Told from the point of view of Odran Yates, an ambitious young man who enters the seminary in the 1970s, *A History of Loneliness* traces the journey of the Yates family and the church itself through pivotal events. Haunted by the deaths of his father and younger brother, Odran searches for fulfillment in a world of conflicting demands. While his mother turns to religious zealotry, his sister marries outside their culture. Rather than providing him with stability, Odran's chosen path ultimately leads him to the church scandals that have shattered the trust of even the most faithful. While he watches his friends and colleagues face accusations, Odran himself becomes scorned and scrutinized by a disapproving public.

Raising provocative questions about the nature of guilt and the stories we tell ourselves to make peace with ourselves, *A History of Loneliness* confirms Boyne as one of the most compelling literary voices of his generation. We hope that the following guide will enrich your exploration of this powerful novel.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the opening chapter, Odran describes his relationship with his sister, Hannah, and with his nephews, Aidan and Jonas. What accounts for the vast differences in the way these siblings respond to their circumstances? How do their choices and temperaments compare to those of your brothers and sisters?
2. How were Hannah and Odran shaped by their mother's transformation from glamorous Aer Lingus flight attendant to deeply religious widow? What did she reveal to them about the search for fulfillment in life?
3. Odran finds himself well suited to the life of a priest, even though he was coerced by his mother. Discuss the various paths to the priesthood that are described in the novel. Do you believe that God "calls" us to various professions?
4. One of the struggles explored in *A History of Loneliness* is the process of making peace with grief. What does the death of Odran's father teach Odran about human nature? Does he ever resolve his guilt over the fact that Cathal died instead of himself? How is Odran affected by watching his sister and nephews mourn the death of Kristian?
5. The novel opens with the line "I did not become ashamed of being Irish until I was well into the middle years of my life." What does it take for Odran to define himself throughout his life? What shapes his view of other national identities, such as America during the second Bush presidency, or Kristian's Lutheran Norwegian homeland?
6. As the scenes shift between decades, what cultural changes does John Boyne show us? What is lost and gained by the declining confidence in church leaders described over the course of Odran's career?
7. In chapter 5, Odran recalls Katherine (his English neighbor with a penchant for lollipops) and his subsequent interrogation by Father Haughton. At that point in his life, what does Odran believe about sexual sin? As a grown man, why is he easily able to accept Jonas, despite church doctrine? Do you consider Odran's vow of celibacy to be useful or harmful?
8. How did your perception of Tom shift throughout the novel? Did you applaud his rebelliousness? Did you ever doubt that he was abusing Brian? Was Tom right when he said that a culture of repression leads to abuse?
9. What did Odran discover about himself during his time in Rome? How did his obsession with a beautiful woman affect him? How did personally serving the Pope change his outlook on church hierarchy?

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10. Odran vividly recalls his interactions with strangers who made assumptions about him based on his clerical collar, from fellow train passengers who lauded him years ago to angry accusers as he grew older. Even Tom accuses him of being inadequate for merely serving as a chaplain in the sheltered world of Terenure College. As a caregiver and an intellectual, what is Odran's natural place in the church? What obligations did he accept with ordination?
11. In the book's closing pages, when Tom is released from prison, Odran asks him if he'll be lonely. Tom replies, "I will, of course. But then I have a history of loneliness, Odran. Don't you?" What led them to be outsiders? Throughout his life, what solace does Odran find in being alone?
12. How did the novel change your views on the Catholic Church's sex abuse scandal? How does the complicity of the fictional characters reflect reality?
13. How does *A History of Loneliness* enhance the themes of history and fate explored in other novels by John Boyne that you have read?

PRAISE FOR *A HISTORY OF LONELINESS*

"The complex architecture of this haunting novel is seamlessly constructed. The path to the priesthood that Odran Yates follows is both understandable and sympathetic. John Boyne has created a character who holds himself accountable for the sins of others. No writer today handles guilt with as much depth and sadness. As Father Yates takes himself to task for all he *didn't* do, nothing less than the sexual duplicity and cover-ups of the Catholic Church are indicted. This is John Boyne's most important novel and of vital importance to Irish history; it is also a gripping story, one no reader can put down until its devastating end." —John Irving

"Beautifully and powerfully written, with an undercurrent of passion, *A History of Loneliness* is aptly titled. A portrait of one of those individuals we imagine we know—but have not a clue of his depths." —Joyce Carol Oats

"John Boyne has plunged into the dark and troubled history of the Catholic Church in our time and come up with a novel to treasure. Unflinching, moving, and true." —John Banville

"An urgently compelling story of the damage that happens when we turn our eyes from wrong. Anyone who wants to know what happened in the Irish Catholic Church needs to read this brave, righteously angry, and stunning book. Some of us have long wondered what it would be like if a master storyteller turned his powers to this theme. Now we know." —Joseph O'Connor

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Boyne was born in Ireland in 1971. He is the author of numerous works of fiction, including *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, a young adult novel that became an international bestseller and was made into an award-winning film. His books have been translated into forty-six languages, and he is the recipient of two Irish Book Awards, the Bistro Book of the Year, and numerous international prizes. He lives in Dublin. For more information, visit www.johnboyne.com.

Guide written by Amy Clements