

PICADOR

Discussion Guide

A Pagan Place

by Edna O'Brien

A newly reissued edition of this haunting, poetic coming-of-age novel from “one of the great writers... in the English-speaking world” (*The New York Times*).

“O’Brien’s evocative prose shows the chilling hold that history and the dead clamp on the living.”

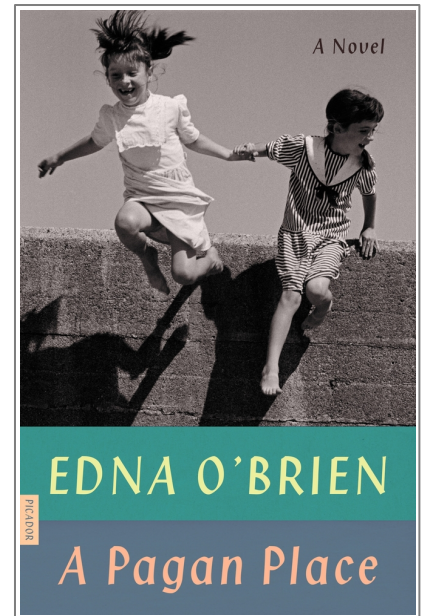
—Paul Gray, *Time*

“O’Brien brings together the earthy and the delicately poetic: she has the soul of Molly Bloom and the skills of Virginia Woolf.” —Ray Sawhill, *Newsweek*

ABOUT THE BOOK

In *A Pagan Place*, Edna O’Brien returns to Ireland, the uniquely wonderful, terrible, and peculiar place she once called home. After leaving to join a religious community in Belgium, a young woman remembers her childhood on the western coast of Ireland. She reflects on the rituals of rural life, the people she encountered, and the enchanting beauty of the landscape.

This is the Ireland of country villages and barley fields, of mischievous girls and druids in the woods. As the impressions of her former home intensify, her mind turns to the shocking event that led to her departure.



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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- At the beginning of the novel, the narrator mentions a nearby forest, characterizing it as a “pagan place” and noting that it used to be a Druid ritual ground; later on, the term comes up again when Mother Baptista speaks of the Catholic duty to serve Christ by converting “pagans” to Catholicism. What does “pagan” mean to each of these characters? Why do you think the author titled the novel as she did, and what “pagan place” is she referring to?
- Why do you think the author chose to write the novel in the second person, and how did the novel’s use of the second person inform your understanding of the protagonist and the reliability of her recollections? Did her relationship with her faith changed over the course of her childhood, and do you think it’s changed since she left home?
- At one point, the protagonist’s mother recalls an encounter with a fortune teller who advised her “never to marry a good-looking man because in that way she would never run the risk of losing him” and starts to laugh uncontrollably. Discuss her marriage with the protagonist’s father. What does this outburst say about their relationship?
- Several characters are never explicitly named, including the protagonist. Why might the author have chosen to name some characters and not others?
- When Mother Baptista questions the protagonist’s decision to enter the convent, the protagonist maintains that it was a choice she’d made a long time ago. What would you have done if you were in her position? To what (if any) extent did you find her statement to be true?
- Early on, the narrator describes her both of her parents as “goodhearted,” albeit in different ways. Would you agree with this characterization, particularly when it comes to her father? At what moments were you able to empathize with him, if at all?
- Emma is set apart from the other characters not only by her decisions and values, but also by the fact that she was born in New York. Is there a relationship between her otherness and her behavior? How did you feel about the way she lived her life, both before and after she gave birth to her son, and the way her family reacted to her pregnancy?
- Toward the end of the novel, the narrator issues a warning to her younger self. How did you interpret this warning? Was it about more than just the letters? Who do you think was responsible for them?
- Growing up, the protagonist sees the human body as a source of sin and shame and “fears nakedness most of all.” To what extent do these perceptions transcend her religion and culture? Did the protagonist’s feelings resonate with you?
- Discuss what happened with Father Declan and how each of the characters responded. How did you feel about the situation and the way the protagonist’s parents reacted?

- The Irish countryside figures prominently in the novel, and each character relates to the land in different ways. How does the landscape restrict and liberate them, especially the protagonist's mother? How do you relate to the place that you call home?
- What impressions of Irish identity did the novel ultimately leave you with? In what ways are the novel and its characters haunted by the legacy of civil war?
- By the novel's end, everyone --- the protagonist, Emma, Ambie --- has left except the protagonist's parents, despite their temporary immigration to America years prior. Why do you think they stayed?
- Think about the novel's final passage. What do you think it suggests for the protagonist, her family, and their relationships with one another going forward?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since her debut novel, *The Country Girls*, **EDNA O'BRIEN** has written more than twenty works of fiction. She is the recipient of many awards, including the Irish PEN Lifetime Achievement Award, the American National Arts Gold Medal, and the Frank O'Connor Prize. Born and raised in the west of Ireland, she has lived in London for many years.



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