



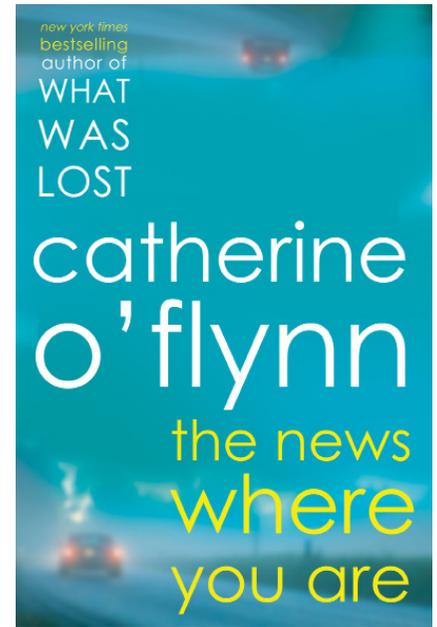
Reading Group Gold

The News Where You Are

Catherine O'Flynn

Catherine O'Flynn On Writing *The News Where You Are*

I worked as a postwoman for a few months. It wasn't a great job. I spent most of the time forcing junk mail through people's doors and the rest of the time unwittingly driving dogs nuts. The one good thing about the job, though, was the walking and the opportunity it gave to become intimate with small slices of the city. I liked the glimpses I got inside offices and factories, the distinct atmosphere of domestic porches. When I got home in the afternoon I'd try to write about some of these things.



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When I came to start writing *The News Where You Are* I looked back over these notes. I'd remembered them as disparate ramblings about nothing in particular: an old people's home with endless corridors, a hospital converted to a casino, a 1960s office block about to be demolished. On looking again, though, I noticed the same theme kept emerging. What seemed to fascinate me was the idea of what we did with old things: old people, old buildings, old ideas. Some were destroyed, some were reinvented, some were hidden away. I began to wonder what traces were left by the people and places that vanished, what marks they left on those that remained.

Birmingham, the city where I live, is constantly reinventing itself. An endless cycle of denying then reclaiming its past, demolishing then dusting off. There seemed a clear analogy with the world of celebrity. An obsession with surface over substance, a fear of the faded and the unfashionable. I wondered if aging celebrities ever tired of the constant reinvention and just longed for demolition.

The main character in the book is called Frank and he's a local TV news presenter. Like most people, I have a terrible fascination with local TV news. It seems to combine the trivial, the surreal and the truly depressing into a quite unique cocktail. That combination of humor and sadness surfaces a lot in my writing. It never feels forced or uneasy to me, just a truthful reflection of the way life is. I liked the idea of an apparently corny anchorman, with his painful gags and tortuous puns masking a more melancholy, thoughtful person. Frank has done the job for years, he's seen so much come and go in the city—from the small stories of forgotten people dying alone, to grand civic regeneration projects. He finds these memories of past stories, places and people



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constantly intrude on his present. He wonders what really happened to his predecessor, Phil Smethway, the local newsreader turned national celebrity who died in mysterious circumstances.

In my first novel, *What Was Lost*, I wrote about loss, memory and the impact of the shifting city around us. The story was set in a shopping mall and revolved around the disappearance of a child detective. I started writing *The News Where You Are* with a completely different set of characters and concerns and yet now that I've finished it, I find that once more I seem to have written about loss, memory and the shifting city. I suspect that I could write a buccaneering adventure novel set in outer space and still these themes would emerge. Perhaps when they stop interesting me, I will stop writing.

Discussion Questions

1. Frank notes that Birmingham is continuously reinventing itself for the future— what parallels, if any, do you see between Birmingham's endless cycles of reinvention and Phil's? Is Douglas interested in reinvention?
2. Consider the marriages in the novel. Do you think Andrea and Mo keep Frank grounded? Did Michelle do that for Phil, or Elsie for Michael? What about Maureen for Douglas? What did you think about Frank's encounter with Phil's first wife, Irene? What does the novel have to say about the importance of relationships?
3. Frank is very close to his daughter, Mo. Can their relationship be seen as a rejection, on Frank's part, of the way his parents raised him? Do you think that Mo's cheer and her "improvements" have an effect on her grandmother, even if perhaps that effect is not as obvious as Mo would like?
4. What are the consequences of not living "in the present" in the novel? Do you think it's worse to be preoccupied with the future or with the past? Can anyone— does anyone in the novel—live entirely in the present? Or is that a privilege relegated only to children?
5. Frank "held on to the belief that people saw beyond the surface." What are some of the other characters' perspectives on the matter? How does the novel deal with this theme?
6. Who makes the better impression, appearance-wise, as a young man: Phil or Michael? As an old man? Knowing what you do about each of their characters,



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however, who do you think was happier? Who do you think was stronger? What do you think this friendship was based upon? What did Michael see in Phil that Irene, for example, didn't? Do you think you can ever really, truly know another person?

7. Compare Maureen and Phil—they both seem to seek death, although Phil does so actively, whereas Maureen “sits in here waiting to fall off the branch.” Is she simply unwilling to put any effort into dying, or is she just too afraid to expect anything more?
8. How does Cyril deal with aging? Do you think that in some ways he's deluding himself? Is that necessarily a bad thing? Were you surprised by Cyril's confession at the end of the novel? Did it change your feelings about him?
9. Why do you think Frank attends the funerals of those who die forgotten? Is it the same reason he's such a “hoarder?” Do you think these actions and habits are melancholic? Or is this kind of remembrance and nostalgia a way of celebrating the past?
10. What were your initial thoughts regarding Phil's state of mind and the hit-and-run while reading the prologue? Were you surprised later on by the revelations about Phil's mental health? How did that knowledge affect your original perception of Phil?
11. The final lines of the book note that “our absence is what remains of us.” Do you agree? How is this illustrated in the novel?