



Reading in the Dark

Seamus Deane

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A **New York Times** Notable Book

Winner of the **Guardian** Fiction Prize

Winner of the **Irish Times** Fiction Award and International Award

Hugely acclaimed in Great Britain, where it was awarded the Guardian Fiction Prize and short-listed for the Booker, Seamus Deane's first novel is a mesmerizing story of childhood set against the violence of Northern Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s.

The boy narrator grows up haunted by a truth he both wants and does not want to discover. The matter: a deadly betrayal, unspoken and unspeakable, born of political enmity. As the boy listens through the silence that surrounds him, the truth spreads like a stain until it engulfs him and his family. And as he listens, and watches, the world of legend--the stone fort of Grianan, home of the warrior Fianna; the Field of the Disappeared, over which no gulls fly--reveals its transfixing reality. Meanwhile the real world of adulthood unfolds its secrets like a collection of folktales: the dead sister walking again; the lost uncle, Eddie, present on every page; the family house "as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it."

Seamus Deane has created a luminous tale about how childhood fear turns into fantasy and fantasy turns into fact. Breathtakingly sad but vibrant and unforgettable, **Reading in the Dark** is one of the finest books about growing up--in Ireland or anywhere--that has ever been written.

Reading in the Dark Details

Date : Published February 24th 1998 by Vintage (first published 1996)

ISBN : 9780375700231

Author : Seamus Deane

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Fiction, European Literature, Irish Literature, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Ireland

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From Reader Review Reading in the Dark for online ebook

Patrick O'Neil says

If you're Irish, then you've probably got a crazy uncle who occasionally comes home from the pub singing "The Boys of 98" at the top of his lungs at three in the morning or your grandmother, after she slipped a little whiskey in your milk to help you sleep, tells you tales of Old Eire that make the Grimm Brother's Fairy Tales look like gobshite. If you're not, well, then you have to read Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* to truly get a glimpse of the Irish experience – notably the Northern Irish experience of growing up in the Fifties in Derry.

Jim says

I'd been working on a book based in Ireland where the protagonists were two brothers so this looked like the perfect reference material for me. I think my memory of the book has suffered because I was reading the book with a purpose in mind rather than enjoying it in its own right. The political edge to the book annoyed me because politics in general annoys me but in order to be accurate it needed to be there.

When I first picked it up to add to my bookshelf I thought I'd remembered nothing about it but a quick flick through was all I needed and I think my inability to remember says more about me and my limitations than it does the author and his ability to write something memorable.

Rebecca Foster says

(4.5) These vivid vignettes of childhood and young adulthood are so convincing that I could have been fooled into believing I was reading a memoir. Indeed, this debut novel has generally been interpreted as heavily autobiographical, with the anonymous narrator, the third of seven children born to Catholic parents in Derry, Northern Ireland, taken to be a stand-in for Deane.

Ireland's internecine violence is the sinister backdrop to this family's everyday sorrows, including the death of a child and the mother's shaky mental health. The narrator also learns a family secret from his dying maternal grandfather that at first thrills him – he knows something his father doesn't! – but later serves to drive him away from his parents. The short chapters take place between 1945 and 1971: starting when the boy is five years old and encountering a household ghost on the stairs and ending as, in his early thirties, he lays his father to rest in the midst of the Troubles.

The Irish have such a knack for holding humor and tragedy up side by side – think John Boyne, James Joyce and Frank McCourt. The one force doesn't negate the other, but the juxtaposition reminds you that life isn't all gloom or laughs. There are some terrifically funny incidents in *Reading in the Dark*, like the individual sex ed. chat with Father Nugent ("And semen is the Latin for seed. Do you have to know Latin to do this?") and going to investigate the rumor of a brothel by the football ground. But there is also perhaps the best ghost story I've ever read, an eerie tale of shape-shifting children he hears from his aunt.

This book captures all the magic, uncertainty and heartache of being a child, in crisp scenes I saw playing out

in my mind. If I have one small, strange complaint, it's that there's *too much* plot – most of the chapters function perfectly well as stand-alone short stories, so, particularly in the last third, the growing obsession with the family secret feels like an unnecessary attempt to tie everything together. That plus the slight irrelevance of the title are the only reasons this misses out on 5 stars from me.

This is probably one of my favorite Irish reads. It's no wonder Deane won so many prizes for this: the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize, the *Guardian* Fiction Prize, and the Irish Literature Prize; he was also shortlisted for the 1996 Booker Prize.

Favorite lines:

“Child, she'd tell me, I think sometimes you're possessed. Can't you just let the past be the past?”

“He looked up at me, smiling, to say: ah well, it was all blood under the bridge now”

“Politics destroyed people's lives in this place, he said. People were better not knowing some things”

Originally published on my blog, Bookish Beck.

Janet says

Couldn't finish this one...which is very rare for me. The quality of the writing was good, however there was no connection between each chapter leaving me disconnected from the book. There were no consistent characters to bond with and no story to lose oneself in. And, having just visited Ireland, I was looking forward to this read.

Beth says

This is another book I read for my Northern Ireland class at Notre Dame, which is where Seamus Deane teaches part of the time. He came to visit my class after we'd finished reading it, and I think the entire class mostly gazed at him in awe while he sat with us to discuss it. It is a haunting book, a beautiful book, and ultimately a very tragic book. About the power of secrets, the value of keeping them and not keeping them. It's a very complicated book as well. I remember the class having a whole period where we just sort of hashed out the details amongst ourselves, how we had interpreted what actually happened. This novel is a fantastic first hand account of the troubles plaguing Ireland at this time.

Caoileann says

tis is very special. Making me feel all colloquial-like, man dear, boys'o, it's a queer bit o writtin...

This is marvellous. Moving, sensitive but not at all slushy or saccharin. It is tender, haunting, and left me feeling quite emotionally fragile after finish it. Ah, Seamus Deane

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

The book begins with an epigraph from "She Moved Through the Fair":

*The people were saying no two were e'er wed
But one had a sorrow that never was said.*

Those two lines carry the essence of the story. The long-term consequences of keeping secrets are at the heart of *Reading in the Dark*.

The unnamed narrator describes his Catholic boyhood in Derry in the 40s and 50s. Both his parents' families have secrets held since the time of the Troubles in the 1920s.

As the protagonist moves from boyhood into adolescence, he becomes almost obsessed with the family legends and bits of conversations he has heard through the years. Who really killed Billy Mahon? Who was the informer? Is Uncle Eddie dead or alive? And why did McIlhenny run off to America? Eventually the boy pieces together the truth, but it comes at some cost to himself and his family. Too late he discovers that even those we love cannot bear our presence once we have uncovered what lies behind their deepest shame.

Woven into the early narrative are some juicy Irish myths, ghost stories, and superstitions. I would have welcomed more of these as the story progressed, but Deane abandoned them in favor of a more serious tone. This was my only disappointment, as I'd come to look forward to the next interjection of folklore.

All in all a fine work for a poet's first novel. Like his narrator, Seamus Deane grew up in Derry in the 40s and 50s, so this could almost work as a fictional memoir.

Beth says

I've read this book three times now. I'm not certain I'll ever perfectly understand it. What I know is that the author has me in his hold; I will follow him wherever this story goes.

Philip says

Reading In The Dark is a first person account of an extraordinary childhood. On the surface, the family seems to be stable enough. They are Catholics and the novel's narrator is about half way along his parents' progeny. Nothing special there...

They are not rich, and apparently not poor. They get by. The lad explores the neighbourhood, makes friends, starts school. Eventually he proves to be quite academic and he clearly goes from personal success to further personal success.

But all the time there's something in the past that labels him. There are people who call him strange names, accuse him of things he hasn't done. He does not understand, but feels the consequences. Life can be complicated when you're born to a Catholic family in Northern Ireland.

The boy grows up in the 1950s and 1960s. Via short, dated chapters, arranged chronologically and starting in February 1945, we are able to build and perhaps experience the lad's world. We share the boy's new experience, feel the changes in his life and body as he does. But there is always something unsaid, intangible, but undoubtedly real and of consequence. Everyone seems to know something, but he has little idea what it all means.

Mother and father remain reticent. Relatives and acquaintances allude to Eddie, the boy's uncle, who is not around any more. Clearly Eddie died in strange circumstances. But in the Northern Ireland of the 1950s, you have to be careful what you say, when you speak and whom you mix with. Just being seen talking to Sergeant Burke, the policeman, can result in your being labelled a traitor, a collaborator, or worse.

The boy's relationship with the Church and its clergy is both fascinating and surreal. There are moments of humour, times of fear, often juxtaposed. There's a maths teacher whose class rules are so complex that any response seems punishable. Serves them right... It seems that whatever contribution an individual might make has the potential to render that person in need of strokes, but the ground rules demand that no-one may opt out.

It's the same in the wider society. When you're a Catholic in Northern Ireland – and perhaps if you are not! – there are no fences you can sit on. Whatever you do it will be wrong. There are enemies on both sides of every fence, so wherever you climb down, beware. Tread carefully, know your place, stay on your guard. But what if, like our young lad, you don't know what to beware of?

Slowly, however, the real truth behind Uncle Eddie's fate emerges. It's only then that the growing boy, and indeed the reader, realises just how complicated – and vindictive – life can be.

Reading *In The Dark* is a highly poetic novel. The scenes are vivid, beautifully portrayed. They are short, but each adds its own new detail to the bigger story of how a family has learned to cope with its own chequered past. Those who don't know the mistakes of history are perhaps doomed to repeat them. Those misled by untruth are not necessarily liars when they restate it. But complicating the past probably confuses the present and disturbs the future. Seamus Deane's novel, *Reading In The Dark*, is a vivid and moving portrait of a family troubled by a past it dare not admit.

Cari says

A collection of vignettes that gradually coalesce to form a complete narrative revolving around family, death, loyalty, and love. Short, sweet, and stunning, with beautiful, simple writing.

Girish says

This is one of the best books about how growing up feels like - a series of images, knowledge gained through episodes, experiences frozen as memories, truths that increase or diminish love and lots and lots of stories..

At the crux of it is a family secret and the nameless child narrator's growing up is characterized by this secret with people around him talking things he doesn't understand at first. You the reader are expected to do the

same and therein lies the fun - you are never right or wrong at your guess since none of the facts are explicitly stated!

Very early in the book, in the chapter named after the title, the narrator explains the sensation of holding a book with it's characters after the lights are switched off. He explains how the characters enact the scenes read so far and you start filling in the rest of the story and gaps from imagination.

Some of the chapters stand out. Like Katie's story of the Francis twins or the episode with Crazy Joe - which have a haunting feel. On the lighter side, the theology lecture or the chapter with the Bishop were ingenious. Later on, the narrator wonders if memories aren't as powerful as ghosts in their haunting capacity. The relationship between the mother, father, brother and the narrator is warm and mesmerizing. You want them to be happy.

This is my third Irish family book and this too seemed to have a family secret and had politics and violence in the backdrop. One of my Irish colleagues once told me, "You don't want to be around at a family gathering since you don't know what secrets are going to come out from the uncles!" Maybe, we are the same.

One recommended read..

Tom says

Put aside at pg 172 but not quite ready to abandon and have no idea when or if I'll return to it. Lovely writing but old-old, hate to say but almost stale Irish story of IRA "ghosts." Deane's language makes it fairly fresh, but not enough to keep me going. Problem is I've read so much Irish lit, past and present, on the same subject, and it becomes like reading yet another work on evil legacy of American slavery: there's Morrison's *Beloved* and there's everything else. And Deane, though talented, is no Morrison. Maybe not quite "everything else," but just too familiar to keep me engaged right now.

Tamsien West (Babbling Books) says

Haunting tale of a family twisted by secrets and a society in conflict with itself. Set in Ireland in the 1940s and 50s *Reading in the Dark* follows a young, unnamed, Catholic boy growing up during one of the many periods of violent conflict between the Protestant and Catholic communities.

"It was a city of bonfires. The Protestants had more than we had. ... triumph of Protestant armies at the Battle of the Boyne, liberation of the city from besieging Catholic armies, and burning of traitor Lundy's effigy who tried to open the gates to the Catholic enemy."

The Derry of this tale is a dark place, deeply divided and filled with fear. There is little trust between friends or even family members and secrets are tearing everyone apart. So much of the story is about those secrets, and the way they can twist relationships and people, rotting them from the inside out, poisoning people against eachother, spouse against spouse, parent against child, and children against siblings.

Deane also weaves in the legends of Ireland. Ghosts haunt people, fairies linger, dreams take on lives of their own, and echoes of long forgotten warriors remain in the land.

"Freedom. In this place. Never was, never would be. What was it anyway? Freedom to do what you liked, that was one thing. Freedom to do what you should, that was another. Close enough to one another and far apart as well"

The story is dark, and not at all happy. There is so much tension and betrayal, so much fear and sadness, that it is not a happy read. But in many ways it is still an enjoyable one. The way Deane writes is so vivid, with unusual descriptions which perfectly evoke a particular mood or moment. I wasn't at all surprised to find that he was a poet of renown, because there is a lyrical quality to the writing that leans towards poetry in parts.

I loved this book for its atmosphere. I felt tossed onto the streets of Derry, violence simmering just below the surface of every interaction.

My only real criticism of it is how misleading the blurb of my edition was. It spoke of a young boy living half in a fantasy world via his dreams and half in the world of conflict and lies he physically inhabited. It suggested that these two worlds were on a collision course. But in reality that is only vaguely true of the first section of the book and in no way encapsulates the domestic focus of this tale.

Paul Bryant says

Well, the blurbs on the back say: "Marvellous...almost impossible to put down" (Independent on Sunday) and "A profoundly emotive and seamlessly structured exploration of loss and regret. It is also funny and authentic. What more could one ask of a book?" My boorish response, however, is

BAH!

So it's all about this boy growing up in Northern Ireland with his mother going round the twist and some great big family secret hanging over them like a dentist's drill, all about the grandfather and the uncle and the dad and the IRA and someone was an informant and betrayed the holy IRA and got shot but everyone was told he'd went to Chicago and all this going on and on while the rather bewildered young lad, the I of the book, tries to grow up past the age of ten without himself being taken for an informant and beaten to a pulp, but instead learning the facts of life and going to the pictures with Irene Mackey. Which by page 150 I couldn't give the right cheek of my own grandad's arse about.

I mean, I read Angela's Ashes, and that was something to moan about, fair play and all. But this? Give him a clip round the ear and a bag of marbles. Jaysus, what a mitherer.

Colleen Browne says

Secrets and lies can wreak havoc on a family but when the family lives in the city of Derry in the North of Ireland during the troubles, the secrets can be more dangerous especially when the secret is connected to the troubles. Seamus Deane has written a beautiful, dramatic, and touching novel about a family whose secrets are just too hard to bear. I highly recommend this book. It is the kind of book that makes reading addictive.

Pamela says

The writing was beautiful, the pace slow, and at times, puzzled me as I tried to figure out where the book was going. But it slowly came together to tell the story of betrayal and guilt and the ripple affects that are felt beyond the first generation. I can't say enough about the writing, which evokes the times, the place, the poetry of the Irish. I actually wished for more drama because the story and the betrayal are really quite dramatic.

Elizabeth says

This is one of my favorite books; I've probably given away 15 copies of this book. Much like Graham Swift's *Waterland*, this is an impeccably written, elegantly crafted novel. Much prefer this treatment of Irish family life to Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*.

Mel says

Deane presents *Reading in the Dark* as a “novel” and I am unclear as to how much is fact and how much is fiction. Much of what he wrote about the dynamic of the Irish family situation rings very true in my own reality. Irish families are a topic close to my heart. His discussion of the things left unsaid in Irish family life rings true and is echoed in many other books about Irish and Irish-American culture, ranging from Alice Carey's *I'll Know it When I See it*, to Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, to Tom Hayden's *Irish on the Inside*. Much of what he writes about the continuing violence, prejudice and trouble in Northern Ireland is factual—even if his characters are fictitious. And I don't know that they are.

Deane presents a compelling look at life in embattled Northern Ireland. He presents to the reader an intimate portrait of an Irish-Catholic family. He offers the superstitions surrounding this family. He allows the reader to accept that a ghost can be a spirit or a memory—that both are haunting and can be frightening enough to devastate lives.

The story is presented in a first person child's view, albeit it an omniscient view. Dean walks us through the confusion of growing up an outcast in his community—which is itself outcast from the society in which it is enmeshed. We, as readers, are presented with several different perspectives of the outsider. Deane's mother keeps herself just beyond the intimacy of her family, specifically her husband and sister, by keeping her secrets. Secrets that eventually drive her insane. Her husband, Dean's father, remains outside because of what he does not know, as well as what he does. Each of the children in this family is left on the outside because none of them knows the whole truth.

For Irish-Americans (like Dean) reaching back to untangle the things unsaid can be a healing process. To write about it offers others a door into the silences in their own families. I have read many books about Irish and Irish-American families and the recurring theme of prevailing silence—and how families function, or don't, around that. Dean's direct insertion of the larger socio-political picture into the dynamic speaks more directly to the issue and perhaps can offer, at least for Deane, a way to find definition to who he is—and why.

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

This book read exactly like a memoir. Although it was quite serious in subject matter (Irish independence), there were a couple of really humorous chapters describing the narrator's experiences in the classroom. The family dynamics pulled at my heartstrings, especially since the author had the uncanny ability to let the reader easily figure out plot twists on one's own with subtle hints.

Rima Rashid says

Reading in the Dark by Seamus Deane was a beautiful story that showed how family secrets were tainted by the political conflict in Northern Ireland during the 'Troubles'.

~

As my second experience of Irish literature, I learnt how mythical folktales about green eyed children taken by fairies and communal anger about victims of police oppression in Derry really shaped the protagonist's identity.
