



Fall on your Knees by Ann-Marie MacDonald

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Fall On Your Knees, has been translated into seventeen languages and received the Commonwealth Prize, the Canadian Author's Association Award and two Canadian Booksellers Association Libris Awards

Summary

"Following the curves of history in the first half of the twentieth century, *Fall on Your Knees* takes us from haunted Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, through the battlefields of World War I, to the emerging jazz scene in New York City, and into the lives of four unforgettable sisters." "The mythically charged family - James, a father of intelligence and immense ambition; Materia, his Lebanese child-bride; and their daughters: Kathleen, the eldest, a beautiful talent preparing for a career as an opera diva; Frances, incorrigible liar and hell-bent bad girl; Mercedes, obsessive Catholic and protector of the flock; and Lily, the adored invalid who takes us on a quest for truth and redemption - is supported by a richly textured cast of characters." "Fall on Your Knees is a story of inescapable family bonds, of terrible secrets, of miracles, racial strife, attempted murder, birth and death, and forbidden love." The Piper family is steeped in secrets, lies, and unspoken truths. At the eye of the storm is one secret that threatens to shake their lives -- even destroy them.

Synopsis: Set on stormy Cape Breton Island off Nova Scotia, *Fall on Your Knees* is an internationally acclaimed multigenerational saga that chronicles the lives of four unforgettable sisters. Theirs is a world filled with driving ambition, inescapable family bonds, and forbidden love. Compellingly written, by turns menacingly dark and hilariously funny, this is an epic tale of five generations of sin, guilt, and redemption.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly Review

Not a single line is superfluous in this richly layered tale of the secrets within several generations of a Canadian family. Both feverishly intense and darkly humorous, the drama of the Piper family emerges amidst a backdrop of racial tension and social change in Canada during the first half of the 20th century. Piano tuner James Piper dotes on his beautiful and musically talented eldest daughter, Kathleen, almost to the exclusion of everyone else, including his Lebanese wife and his other daughters. After Kathleen's death during childbirth and his wife's suicide a few days later, James forbids any mention of Kathleen's name. But the bitter fruit of illicit passion will continue to take its toll on Kathleen's survivors. Though the mortality rate in this family sometimes challenges credibility, playwright and actress MacDonald's ambitious first novel displays a remarkable assurance of style, pacing and plotting as unexpected twists propel a complex story that builds inexorably to tragedy. MacDonald uses the surface tension and love between James and his daughters to explore

the repercussions of repression, sin, guilt and violence that simmer beneath the family's delicately maintained equilibrium. Her gifts for character development, comic dialogue and vivid evocation of social milieu and specific background detail-from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, to New York City in the 1920s-add texture to an entrancing narrative. Literary Guild and Doubleday Book Club alternate selections; author tour. (Apr.) FYI: MacDonald began this book as a play but finished it five years later as her first work of fiction. Fall on Your Knees was previously published in Canada, where it rose to the top of the bestseller lists.

Booklist Review

A family pays the wages of lust in this memorable first novel, for it is most often lust that leads to unsuitable if not unholy couplings in the Piper family of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, in the early part of this century. Eighteen-year-old piano tuner James Piper is so smitten with 12-year-old Materia Mahmoud that he entices her from her traditional Lebanese family to marry him. Before she's 14 the untutored Materia gives birth to Kathleen, the beautiful and gifted child whom she is unable to love but whom James takes to his heart. There are more daughters: Mercedes, the good girl who becomes the little mother; Other Lily, who dies unbaptized when one day old; Frances, the bad girl who becomes a bawdy entertainer and worse; and Kathleen's daughter, Lily, the saintly crippled girl who will learn the secrets and find resolution and redemption. Actress-playwright MacDonald is a talented storyteller with a crisp yet lilting prose style that captures equally well the atmospheres of World War I trenches and Harlem jazz clubs.

From Kirkus Reviews

From award-winning Canadian actress and playwright MacDonald comes a full-bodied, ever-rolling debut, the story of a talented Cape Breton family with more than its share of repression and tragedy. As the 19th century ends, young James Piper travels from the Breton hinterland to the civilized port of Sydney seeking his fortune, and in no time at all he acquires a child bride, a house built by his Lebanese father-in-law, and the everlasting enmity of his wife's powerful family. Although the ardor between James and his spouse soon cools, they now have a daughter, Kathleen, who seems destined for great things when her breathtaking voice and beauty begin to captivate all as she enters her teens. But another shadow falls on the family when James finds himself making improper advances to her. Appalled, he patches things up with his wife (two more daughters being the result), goes off to fight in WW I, and sends Kathleen to New York to study voice after he returns. All still isn't well, however, when she comes home pregnant six months later, then dies in childbirth when Mom slices her open to save her daughter's twins. One of them dies anyway, followed two days later by Mom, who commits suicide. James is left with three girls to raise, all of them scarred for life by the crisis: The newborn contracts polio when her aunt Frances, a child herself, tries to baptize her in a nearby creek; Frances is raped by James in his grief at losing Kathleen; the eldest, a witness to the rape, is also the one to find her mother's body. Such awful events, though quickly repressed, bode no good for the family, and ultimately tragedy overtakes them all. A plate piled dangerously high with calamities, perhaps, but the time, place, and people- -especially the children--all ring clear and true, making for an accomplished, considerably affecting saga.



Biography

Ann-Marie MacDonald, playwright, actor, novelist, (born in Baden-Baden, West Germany 29 Oct 1958). Until she was five, MacDonald lived on the Royal Canadian Air Force base at Baden-Baden; but she considered her real home to be Nova Scotia, where both her parents had been born - her father to a family of Scottish heritage in New Waterford, and her mother to a family of Lebanese heritage in Sydney. MacDonald would later draw on this unusual family background for her novel *Fall on Your Knees*.

MacDonald's first career was in acting. She graduated from the National Theatre School in 1980, then became a popular performer in Toronto theatre

Her first play, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, was premiered in 1988 by The Nightwood Theatre, and since has had over 100 productions in Canada, the U.S. and abroad. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* was produced by Canadian Stage in Spring 2001 and ran to sold out audiences with MacDonald in the lead role. The play has been honored with the Governor General's Award, The Chalmers Award and the Canadian Author's Association Award. MacDonald's theatrical roots are in collective creations such as *This is For Your Anna* and collaborations such as *Nancy Prew Clue in the Fast Lane*. She co-created and performed in Theatre Columbus' *The Attic, The Pearls, and 3 Fine Girls* (Scirocco Press). Her other works for the theatre include the play *The Arab's Mouth* (Blizzard Press) and the libretto for the opera *Nigredo Hotel*. All have been produced numerous times in Canada and several have toured internationally.

MacDonald has performed in theatres across Canada, and continues to act in film, television and theatre. Screen credits include *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing, Where the Spirit Lives* (Gemini Award) and most recently the role of Frances in *Better Than Chocolate*. Her latest theatre production is the new musical comedy, *Anything that Moves*, with script by Ann-Marie MacDonald and Alisa Palmer, lyrics by MacDonald and music by Allen Cole. *Anything That Moves* won the Dora Award for Outstanding New Musical. Ann-Marie MacDonald lives in Toronto.

Bibliography

Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet) - 1988 play
The Arab's Mouth - 1990 (play)
Nigredo Hotel - 1992 (opera libretto)
The Attic, the Pearls and Three Fine Girls - 1995 (play)
Fall on Your Knees - 1996 (novel)
Anything That Moves - 2000 (book and lyrics for musical)
The Way the Crow Flies - 2003 (novel, shortlisted for the Giller Prize)
Belle Moral - 2004 (play)

Interview with the Author (Oprah Book Club, 2002)

Macdonald: "Some people talk about children wanting to be born as though somewhere out there in the collective unconscious there's a spirit, or a thought or an idea that wants to be born. And I sometimes feel that way about stories...that they're there and they want to be told. *Fall on Your Knees* is really a story about secrets and family, and the idea that there are some stories or truths that need to be expressed. In terms of the secrets that imbue and underlie *Fall on Your Knees*, they were as much of a mystery to me as I was creating the story as they are to the readers.

When I was writing this story, I often would be asked the question, 'Whom are you writing for?' For me, it was like there was this reader, this benevolent stranger, whose face I couldn't quite see. And I'd think, You're here. You're waiting. You've come. What am I going to give you? What's going on? Who's watching this? Whose eyes am I behind? What is she holding? It might be harrowing. I might ask you to go places you would never, ever buy a ticket to go. And in a way, I feel that part of my function as a writer is to let the reader know that we're actually going to go to spooky, disturbing places or some places that might morally challenge some people. But I'm going there with you. So that's really how it progressed. And I enjoy spooking myself, too."

"I grew up in a family where the love of stories is very strong. And there's also a love of performance. I think one reason stories were so important in my family was that we moved around a lot. My father was in the Air Force when I was growing up and we moved from place to place. You can't pack up your friends. You don't pack up your house. You don't put down roots. I think that's why stories became so tremendously important to me. My roots were in memories, stories and books.

"Because we moved around a lot, I didn't have a hometown. I didn't have authentic roots of my own, but my parents did, and those roots were in Cape Breton Island [Nova Scotia]. We would spend weeks there in the summer. We'd go back to this enchanted place, this God's country, where the best, the brightest, the most interesting, funniest, most talented people on the planet come from...this speck! It was always so exciting to go back there. It really did become a mythical landscape for me.

"I think when I first came to write *Fall on Your Knees*, one of those early images was of this house. And it was almost like, 'I'm a camera, I'm going to pull back from this house. Where is this house? It's in this kind of rugged, rocky, terrain. Oh, and there's a shoreline. It's an island. It's Cape Breton! It's someplace I know.' And it's the real Cape Breton, but it's also the Cape Breton of my imagination. Which is why I think the story wanted to be set in the past, to give that a little more play. It exerted such a mythical pull on my imagination because of my background."

Places that Inspired the Novel

Macdonald: "For me, once something inspires the heart, then the mind has got to get it right. [Cape Breton] isn't just a romantic landscape. This is a real place, where real people live. That's exciting and tremendously rich.

A lot of people don't realize just how incredibly diverse Cape Breton Island is culturally. There are more than 40 identifiable ethnic groups on that island. At one time, you could hear a lot of different languages. People from all over the world came, including my mother's people [from Lebanon] at the turn of the century, and ultimately, they're all Cape Bretoners.

I did have to recreate the New Waterford of that time. In a place that is driven by one industry, it's not like a lot of buildings and places are preserved. In New Waterford, as in many mining towns, there were company houses, A-frames, semi-detached, and that's classic. You can still see some of those old houses.

In communities like [New Waterford], all the beauty, imagination and aesthetic yearning would be expressed by the church. There is no shortage of churches in Cape Breton, especially Catholic churches.

Holy Angels School is a very real place. Members of my family have graduated from Holy Angels. The nuns, in the great tradition of their Order, committed themselves to educating girls. Number 12 Colliery, the mine, was taken down several years ago, but my father used to tell stories about the disasters and the hard work. That town was like a real boomtown, kind of a wild great place to grow up."

Discussion Questions (from ReadingGroupGuide.com)

- 1.** In the Prologue "Silent Pictures", the author sets the scene through a narrator's voice and drops you into the middle of the Piper family's tangled relationships. Did the tale unfold as you expected? Who did you first believe the original narrator was? Think about how the narrator's voice changes throughout the novel. How does the shifting point of view affect the telling of the story?
- 2.** When Materia runs away with James at 13, Mr. Mahmoud makes her marry James but then gives them a house and disowns his daughter. Were you surprised by the apparent contradiction? What kind of message did this send to Materia, her mother and her siblings? And, what role do you think this abandonment plays in her unraveling?
- 3.** James is a complex character. In some ways we feel compassion for him but in others we grow to hate him. Discuss what you think drove him at times to protect his family and at times to destroy them? What do you think his motives were for the choices that he made?
- 4.** Religion and skin color play a large role in separating and defining the characters in this novel. For example, Mrs. Luvovitz, Materia's only friend, is Jewish and married to the kosher butcher. James is Protestant and married to the Catholic Materia. Materia's father was Catholic but claims he took the name Mahmoud in honor of the Muslim woman who protected him from death. Also, Materia is Lebanese and dark. James is Gaelic and pale. James doesn't even realize that Albert, his best friend in the mine, is black because of the soot and dim lighting. Jameel who is Lebanese and married to Materia's sister Camille is "shit-scared of being seen as colored" (p.335). What role do you think all these differences play in the interactions of the characters? And, how do you think these differences would be seen today as opposed to 100 years ago?
- 5.** Cape Breton Island is a landscape of forlorn beauty enveloped in a new-found poverty

due to the Depression. How does the setting affect or mirror the people in it? Why do you think the author chose an island to set the scene, and what is the role of the surrounding sea? Do you think the community's isolation is a factor in it becoming an accepting "melting pot"? And, what role does wealth play in social position and status for families like the Mahmouds, the Pipers and the Taylors?

6. The author uses foreshadowing skillfully throughout her novel. For example, Matera uses scissors to snip the kidneys for the kidney pie then uses them to perform a Cesarian on her illegitimately pregnant daughter. What are some examples of foreshadowing you thought were most effective or haunting? Did the author take you where you expected? Or were there plot twists that surprised you?

7. Incest is a recurrent theme throughout the novel. James enlists in the army during WWI in part due to his sexual feelings for his daughter Kathleen and later acts on these urges with Frances. Did you realize what Mercedes witnessed with James and Frances on the "rocking chair" before or after she did? And, what role do you think that incest plays in Frances becoming a bawdy "little girl" stripper who performs sexual favors for cash?

8. During her mother's funeral, Frances begins to convulse with laughter. She expects punishment yet receives compassion. They think she's crying. And, she realizes, "The facts of the situation don't necessarily indicate anything about the truth of the situation. In this moment, fact and truth become separated and commence to wander like twins in a fairy tale, waiting to be united by that special someone who possesses the secret of telling them apart" (page 137). Cite some examples of how this statement rang true throughout the book and how some things aren't what they seem when you dig away at the surface.

9. Though concerned about the possibility of a mixed marriage, Mercedes promises her heart to Ralph. He breaks his promise not because of religion but because he falls in love with another woman at college. Were you surprised at how easily Ralph's parents accepted his new Catholic wife especially in the early part of the 20th century? Do you think Mercedes ever moves past this heartache?

10. Mercedes believes that Lily is a candidate for sainthood in part due to her incredible compassion and ability to cure but also in part due to the voices Mercedes believes she hears and the things she senses. Do you believe that Lily is exceptional? Do you think Ambrose really visits her? How could Lily remember things that happened as early as her infancy? What role do the spirits play throughout the novel?

11. On page 334, MacDonald writes "The thief you fear the most is not the one who steals mere things." She's referring to Teresa who knows that Frances stole Mrs. Mahmoud's jewelry but fears more what Frances is up to next with regard to Ginger and their family. What are other examples of things stolen (both tangible and intangible) in the book?

12. Why does Frances take Ginger to the mine? What is it about him that makes her want to bear his child so badly? How do you think the pregnancy survived the bullet? And, do you believe Frances knew what really happened to her child? How much do you think race had to do with Mercedes' decision?

13. Friendship doesn't come easily for the Pipers. Most of their relationships are strained or taboo. Discuss how Rose and Kathleen's relationship develops and how music ties them together. They also share an unusual and ironic tie -- Rose, who is black, has a white, blond mother and Kathleen, who is fair, has a dark-skinned mother of Middle Eastern descent. Why do you think Kathleen is drawn to Rose in the way that she is? And, what do you think

of the way James ends the union?

14. Throughout the book, you're never quite sure who fathered Kathleen's twins. Did you ever think that James might actually be Lily's father? Who did you think it was and did your opinion change over time? The author doesn't make the lineage absolutely clear until the family tree is delivered to Lily in New York at the very end of the book. Were you surprised by what you learned? Do you think Lily is surprised by all the connections?

15. On the surface, the Pipers could seem like a "normal family" but when you peel back the layers, a very different picture is revealed. Did you ever meet a person or family with unusual circumstances and connections that you accidentally uncovered? Could you identify with any of the characters? And, if so, why? If the story continued, what do you think would become of Lily in New York?

16. At the end of the novel, many of the characters have died and Lily is living far from "home". Do you see this as a new beginning or as the sad close of a tale? Do you think the novel has a redemptive ending? What constitutes redemption?

Discussion Questions (from library's online Novelist research database)

1. How does the Prologue, "Silent Pictures," set up the rest of the novel? Why does MacDonald begin the story this way?

The Prologue sets up a series of puzzles for readers to solve. The novel's first words are "They're all dead now," taking at least that much mystery away, but the novel becomes a sort of ghost story instead. The unnamed narrator shows us a series of photographs, one for each Piper, containing one critical image of that person. We read to find out who these ghostly figures in the photographs are and how they died. In three cases we don't get a photograph of a ghostly figure, but the ghost of a photograph, since there are none to show of Other Lily, Ambrose and Kathleen. One Piper is not presented in the family photos in "Silent Pictures," however: Lily. Lily seems to be the unnamed narrator of this chapter, both because she does not appear in the pictures and because she is the sole Piper from the main story alive at the end. It appears to be the only chapter she narrates, and it ties the first sentence of the novel to the novel's end where she tells Anthony about his family. MacDonald gives the deaths of the Pipers away in the first sentence and allows them to haunt the text, both in the Prologue and in the frequent foreshadowing throughout the novel. Readers try to piece together the Piper past just as characters like Frances do, from shadowy reminders and fragments of the story, until finally all is revealed.

2. How sympathetic a figure is James? Did your feelings about him change?

The first part of the story follows James's perspective and his struggles very closely, and it is hard not to sympathize with him as he tries to make his way in the world as an orphaned piano tuner. The way he dotes on baby Kathleen -- in stark contrast to her mother Materia's inability to love her at all -- is touching and uncomplicated until Kathleen is twelve, when James realizes he wants his daughter sexually. He struggles against those urges valiantly, and although his incestuous desires make it more disturbing for readers to like James, it is hard not to respect his attempts to prevent disaster. He cares too much for Kathleen to risk his own willpower failing, and so he goes as far as enlisting in the army in wartime to

guarantee her safety. His wartime experiences shake him to the core, but even as shattered as he is upon his return from World War I, he comes back determined to send Kathleen away and safeguard her body and future.

The night of Kathleen's death is a turning point in the story in many ways, with the narrative shift away from James as just one example. Readers have to make assumptions about what happened in New York and what happened once Kathleen returned to New Waterford, so for the first time in the novel, James's motivations and actions slip from focus. James is not the center of attention in the novel anymore when Frances and Mercedes take center stage, and as a result, James becomes more difficult to understand just at the moment he becomes most menacing and despicable. We understand him little better than his daughters do, and regard him with the same fear and dread. James becomes a bootlegger who beats and molests Frances, and would apparently even have killed her and her unborn child had Mercedes not prevented him by pushing him down the stairs. The shift in perspective from James to his daughters makes it impossible to understand or sympathize with James Piper in the second half of the story, even if his actions had not already made that sympathy unlikely.

3. Fall on Your Knees is very much a tale of love denied. Where is love expected and not given? Where is love found but forbidden?

Fall on Your Knees is full of relationships where love should exist, but for some reason does not. A number of these relationships are between mothers or mother-figures and their children, such as Materia and Kathleen, or Mercedes and Lily. The images of mothering in the story are often horrifying, from Materia breast-feeding unloved baby Kathleen with bloody nipples, to James holding six-year-old Frances in his lap on the rocking chair while he molests her. Even in the cases where a mother-figure loves her child, there is something fierce and destructive mixed in with the love. Frances loves Lily while tormenting her endlessly with stories about her dead twin brother Ambrose and their mysterious parentage. Mercedes, as much as she loves Frances, takes the baby Frances desperately wants away from her. Materia believes she used her kitchen scissors to cut Kathleen open and rescue the twins because she finally felt love for Kathleen, however fatal that love's manifestation. Love within families is very complex in the story and rarely what you would expect.

The list of forbidden loves in the novel is also long, and the reasons those loves are forbidden is varied. In the story, we see incest, miscegenation, homosexuality, and the plight of unwed mothers. In this story, where love is found, it is forbidden and it fails. Even the love between Kathleen and Rose is destined to fail, not just because of the intervention of Rose's mother and Kathleen's father, but also because the barriers put between the two lovers were so large. Rose tells Lily that when Kathleen never answered her letters, she believed Kathleen must have given in to all the pressure to end the relationship, and that she only started to question Kathleen's absence when Kathleen didn't return to New York to start up her career again. Rose began saving for a train ticket to Cape Breton, but by that time Kathleen was dead. While Rose's reasons for not finding Kathleen are understandable, Lily, who traveled most of the way from Cape Breton to New York on foot, reminds her,

"You could've walked" (p. 488). Rose and Kathleen had the strongest romantic love depicted in the novel, but even that love was unequal to the pressures of prejudice, distance and self-doubt.

4. Were you surprised by the female sexuality in the novel? What are the Piper women like?

The Piper women are early bloomers, becoming sexually precocious and even sexually predatory at an early age. Materia is the aggressor in the scene where she meets James, ogling him and imagining touching him before he has ever laid eyes on her; she is only twelve at the time. James looks back on it bitterly later, asking himself, "How had he been ensnared by a child? There was something not right about Materia. Normal children didn't run away with men . . . She had seduced him. That was why he hadn't noticed she was a child. Because she wasn't one. Not a real one" (p. 40). Materia later spends many lonely hours standing on the cliffs, looking out over the water like a siren waiting to lure men to their deaths, suggesting something of the more directly dangerous and seductive qualities her daughters will later show more forcefully.

Kathleen, as beautiful and talented as she is, makes people uncomfortable because she, like her mother, isn't childlike enough: "The lady teacher got the creeps from the porcelain girl with the mermaid eyes. The child seemed to be in disguise . . . Perhaps she wasn't a child at all" (p. 45-46). It's also her early interest in boys at school that convinces James to send her away to Holy Angels for her education. In New York, Kathleen will begin a sexual relationship with David quite casually, despite having been raised in conservative circumstances in a remote area and being only eighteen. Despite her lack of experience, she shows no hesitation to embark on a sexual relationship with a man she neither loves nor intends to marry. Kathleen lures audiences with her voice from an early age, but her appeal is dangerous and siren-like, as Materia's was. As Kathleen spends more and more time looking at herself in the mirror, she imagines her own future luring men to their deaths: "her lips swollen with kissing, eyes caressing, come with me to my home beneath the sea and I will love you" (p. 77).

Frances becomes a stripper at a speakeasy at sixteen, mixing the bawdy and childlike in her routines, stripping from very adult costumes down to only a diaper during some performances. The limited sexual favors she offers for sale are also a mixture of the childlike and obscene, as she wriggles on men's laps or masturbates them with her first communion glove.

The one relationship that any of the Piper women have that seems healthy and loving is the one most prohibited by social prejudices of the day, namely the interracial lesbian relationship between Kathleen and Rose. Kathleen is surprisingly brazen in her love of Rose, or perhaps innocent of exactly how taboo such a relationship really is. She and Rose raise eyebrows enough walking together as friends because of racial prejudices; with Rose dressed as a man and the two of them having sex in alleyways, the pair surely risk disaster as they carelessly explore

5. How are memory and storytelling related in the novel? How does that connection influence the way MacDonald chooses to present the story?

Frances tells Lily wild stories about her origins, mostly because Frances cannot remember the truth. The events surrounding Kathleen's death when Frances was six were so traumatic, Frances's mind has simply blocked it out, albeit imperfectly. Frances still remembers pieces of the truth, as if from a nightmare, but she can't sort through all the jumbled, horrific images in her head without putting them into some structure, like a story for Lily. Frances needs to tell the stories in order to recover her own memories: "Frances watches and remembers when she told Lily that her real daddy was a black man from The Coke Ovens. It was Leo Taylor she was thinking of, having seen him at James's still. She told Lily this story in order to find out if it was true. Like the old orange-cat story -- how it smothered Ambrose, and Daddy buried it in the garden. Like the story of how Mumma drowned Ambrose in the creek, and the one about the old French mine. Frances needs to say a story out loud to divine how much truth runs beneath the surface" (p. 301).

The reader is put in a similar position. MacDonald mixes past, present and future, changes perspectives and focuses, and uses foreshadowing frequently to recreate Frances's experience of trying to piece together the whole story from fragments of the truth hopelessly mixed with suspicions, fears, and flights of fancy. Just as the knowledge of what happened comes to her late, in the form of James's confessions and Kathleen's diary, we have to wait for those revelations too. Frances finally finds peace in knowing the truth and sharing that story with Mercedes, making the family reunion in New York possible and freeing the surviving members of the family from all the old family ghosts and secrets.

6. Compare Frances and Mercedes. Are the two sisters complete opposites? Or more similar than they appear at first glance?

Frances is a rebellious child and even worse as a teenager. Long-suffering Mercedes puts all her dreams aside to stay at home and care for the family. Frances's sexuality runs rampant, while Mercedes dies a virgin, as far as readers can tell. If Frances is promiscuous, Mercedes is nunnish. And yet, the two sisters, so close in age and so different in temperament, share quite a few similarities. Both sisters abuse their bodies in an attempt to assuage guilty consciences or ensure future happiness. Frances will goad James into beatings because it makes her feel peaceful, and she will sell sexual favors at the club in an attempt to abase herself and secure money for Lily's escape from New Waterford all at the same time. Mercedes torments her body in the guise of religious fervor, denying herself physical pleasures of all kinds and eating coal and wearing sackcloth as a way of mortifying her flesh. While Frances's desperation is open, Mercedes comes to realize that her own behavior, while very different in appearance, was at heart motivated by the same thing: "She wonders when it was that she began to despair. All these years she mistook it for pious resignation. Now she sees the difference. Such a fine line between a state of grace and a state of mortal sin" (p. 504).

7. Why does Frances want Leo Taylor's child? Why does Mercedes go to such lengths to take that child away?

Frances is obsessed with the possibility that Lily and Ambrose were the result of a sexual relationship Kathleen had with a black man, which may have something to do with her own desire to bear a child of mixed race. Frances has been Kathleen's sexual surrogate and the

scapegoat for Kathleen's shortcomings for so long that her own fate seems inextricably bound to her sister's. Frances's fascination with Teresa may be another source of her fixation on Teresa's brother Leo, however. When Frances was small, she saw Teresa and thought her so beautiful that she must be queen of some distant land. After Teresa gave Frances a piece of candy, the child began to dream of Teresa coming to rescue her, imagining that they would drive off together "into the land of black and white licorice peppermint rock candy" (p. 136). That she convinces Leo Taylor, owner of Leo Taylor Transport, to drive her away in his car and help her escape her abusive father is another sign that Frances's desire to seduce Leo is perhaps a displaced fascination with his sister.

Mercedes is jealous of Frances once her sister is pregnant, for in pregnancy Frances finds a peace and happiness she has never known before. Much to Mercedes's horror, Frances grows up and stops being the needy, desperate child that Mercedes always took care of. Mercedes resents the unborn baby for taking her own child Frances away. Those considerations definitely play a part in Mercedes's decision to send the baby away to an orphanage, although she is also motivated by practical concerns: "The knowledge that it is to be a colored child is most useful in determining its future.

First of all, there is now no question of keeping it. Illegitimacy is a terrible but invisible blot, whereas miscegenation cannot be concealed. Neither mother nor child deserves to live thus doubly stained. Such is the charitable view" (p. 365). The combination of the public shame of an illegitimate, mixed race child in the house and the private loss of Frances as her child is too much for Mercedes to contemplate.

8. At the end, family secrets are finally revealed and the Pipers themselves are either dead or far from New Waterford. Are the final revelations about Kathleen in New York surprising? Do you feel the far-flung Pipers find redemption -- or at least peace -- at the story's end?

Readers may well have suspicions about who Lily's father really is, but until we read Kathleen's diary, there is little chance for a reader to suspect who Kathleen's lover in New York really was. Until we are given the diary and Kathleen's own first-person account of her feelings and her life in New York, we have too little information to go on. For most of the novel, Kathleen's point of view is missing from the story because she is dead, and a key piece of the puzzle is hidden from readers.

At the end of the story, Frances forgives both James and Mercedes, and just as significantly, Frances makes sure Mercedes knows the truth about what happened to Kathleen. Mercedes makes amends for the wrong she may have done in sending Anthony away by giving him the Piper house, the reconstructed family tree, and sending him to Lily and Rose in New York. In New York, the remaining members of the extended Piper family are reunited, and Anthony is given the family he has lacked his whole life. While the terrible secrets and wrongs of the past cannot be undone, there is a sense of closure and peace in this ending because the past can no longer threaten and haunt the future.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin* (2000).

E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News* (1994).

Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992).

Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993).

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