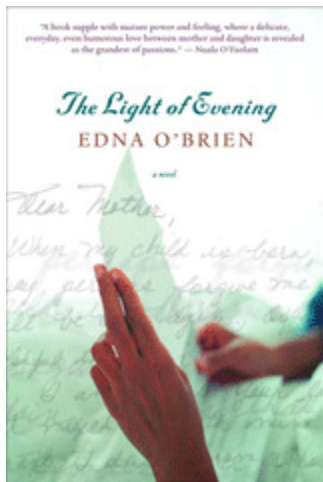


A Reader's Guide



The Light of Evening

by Edna O'Brien

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About the Book

Selected as a Best Book of the Year:

Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Rocky Mountain News, Boston Phoenix

"A delicate, everyday, even humorous love between mother and daughter is revealed as the grandest of passions." —Nuala O'Faolain

As she has in much of her stunning fiction, Edna O'Brien displays in *The Light of Evening* a fierce and intimate knowledge of the forces that both bind families together and keep them at odds.

From her hospital bed in Dublin, the ailing Dilly Macready eagerly awaits a visit from her long-estranged daughter, Eleanora. Years before, Eleanora fled Ireland for London when her sensuous first novel caused a local scandal. Her mother beseeches her to return home, sending letters that are priceless in their mix of love, guilt, and recrimination. For all her mother's disapproval, Dilly herself knows something of Eleanora's need for freedom: as a young woman in the 1920s, she left Ireland for a new life in New York City, before tragedy sent her back to Ireland.

A novel of dreams and affections, lamentations and betrayals, *The Light of Evening* is a luminous, truthful, and heartrending read.

"You'll turn the pages of this book with the greatest reluctance, and that is because each page is so seductive, so dazzling, you won't want to leave it. Whether the setting is Brooklyn or London or County Clare itself, richness of detail and atmosphere draws you in." —Frank McCourt

"O'Brien is still writing beautifully about the often painful and startling ways in which women learn about men, about love, about the world—and about themselves." —Francine Prose, *People*, starred review

"Reading Edna O'Brien is like going into a special place full of radiant energy and intense understanding, unlike any other reading enclosure I know." —Alice Munro

About the Author

Edna O'Brien is the author of many acclaimed works of fiction, including *The Country Girls* trilogy and *House of Splendid Isolation*. Her novels *Wild Decembers* and *In the Forest* were both selected as New York Times Notable Books and Book Sense picks, and her novel *Lantern Slides* received the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction. In 2002, O'Brien was awarded the National Medal for Fiction by the National Arts Club. An honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she was born and raised in Ireland and has lived in London for many years.

"Philip Roth has called Edna O'Brien the most gifted woman now writing fiction in English, and it is hard not to agree." —*Wall Street Journal*

"One of the scant handful of careers in English-speaking letters that unquestionably deserves to be called great." —*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *The Light of Evening* for every reader.

1. The central relationship in *The Light of Evening* is that of a mother and daughter who long for closeness yet remain eternally at odds. What is revealed about their personal histories that could account for their feelings toward each other? Do you think that they ultimately have a clear assessment of one another? Are they more alike than they believe? How so or how not?
2. Dilly's letters to Eleanora are a mixture of quotidian details, admonishments for her daughter, barbs, small kindnesses, and beseeching requests. What do the missives reveal about her hopes and dreams for her daughter and for herself? What details point to her understanding or lack of understanding of her daughter's life?
3. When Bridget finds the note that begins "I want to go to America . . ." under her daughter's mattress, why do you think she reacts the way she does? Would any mother have the same response? How might the political climate in Ireland at the time have influenced Dilly's wish to leave and Bridget's strong response to it?
4. How is the relationship between Dilly and Eleanora like and unlike that between Dilly and Bridget?
5. The pull of home and family saturates the novel. In sending Dilly off, Bridget implores her, "Do not forget us, Dilly, do not ever forget your own people." Similar sentiments are threaded through Dilly's own letters to Eleanora. How does the place we call home define who we are? Discuss the pull County Clare has for Dilly and Eleanora.
6. Through Dilly's recollection of her time as a maid in Brooklyn, O'Brien offers a cinematic portrayal of New York City as seen through the eyes of an immigrant. Dilly recounts her passage to America, which is marked by tragedy, the fear and isolation of forging her way in a strange place, and also the excitement and adventure of starting a new life. How does this segment of historical fiction enrich our understanding of Dilly?
7. The Christmas fete at the McCormacks' Brooklyn mansion is an elaborate affair, which O'Brien describes in lavish detail. What does O'Brien's scene reveal of the Irish community in New York at the time? How do the events of that evening mark a turn in Dilly's fortunes?
8. Despite the heartache, loneliness, and injustice Dilly experienced in America, why do you suppose her memories of her time there remain so vivid? When she is alone in the hospital ward, why do you think her thoughts so often drift back to Coney Island, Solveig, Gabriel, and Mary Kate? Is there a period in your life that you cherish with the same kind of intensity?
9. What is the significance of Gabriel's wedding gift for Dilly and Cornelius? What message does Dilly infer from it?

- 10.** Dilly recalls sending her daughter off to convent school for the first time: "I watched your going down the lawn and knew that it was forever. The sped arrow cannot be recalled." Where else in the novel are small events imbued with enormous symbolic import? What other instances are there of irrevocable actions that alter the characters' lives?
- 11.** How does Eleanora's flight from Ireland, and her subsequent self-imposed exile in London, widen the rift between mother and daughter? Do you think one is more at fault than the other in this situation? Given her history, how might Dilly's reaction have been more complicated than Eleanora understood at the time?
- 12.** She spends much of her stay in the Dublin hospital reminiscing about happier days, "but for Dilly the crux of her thinking is her family, her children, disentangling the hurts they have caused her." Who has caused her the greatest hurt, ultimately?
- 13.** Throughout the novel there are portents of events to come; birds, cats, even ghosts appear as harbingers. In the opening scene, for instance, Dilly is trying to quiet a crow, which in mythology is the warning emblem of death. How do these apparitions contribute to the atmosphere of the novel? What events do they foreshadow?
- 14.** Sister Consolata's conviction that a visit from Eleanora will bring reconciliation and peace gives a certain amount of solace to Dilly as she waits in Dublin. How does the reality of Eleanora's visit diverge from expectations? Is Eleanora's behavior excusable? What are her motivations for leaving as she does, and what are the consequences?
- 15.** While Eleanora's letters to Dilly feature lyrical descriptions of her surroundings, they are lacking in personal detail. Why does she edit her correspondence home in this way? In contrast, her journal is written with great emotion. Why do you think she keeps her true self under wraps? How does this raise the stakes when she leaves the journal behind in Dublin?
- 16.** In a New Year's greeting to Eleanora, Dilly writes, "But remember love is all bull, the only true love is that between a mother and a child." How is this sentiment reflected in the events of the novel? Consider the relationships between Dilly and Cornelius, between Eleanora and Hermann—how are they "bull"?
- 17.** O'Brien chose, as an epigraph for her novel, a quote from William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." How is this thought reflected in *The Light of Evening*? How is the past always present in the lives of O'Brien's characters?
- 18.** *The Light of Evening* is O'Brien's most autobiographical work to date. In an interview she described the novel as "part memoir, part fiction, part journal and hopefully the wings of imagination." Where do you find elements of each of these things in the novel? How did her exploration of this story through fiction open up narrative possibilities that would not have been available to her in nonfiction? How do you suppose her authorial choice enriched the story?

For Further Reading

The following works by Edna O'Brien may be of interest to readers who enjoyed *The Light of Evening*:

In the Forest

Wild Decembers

A Pagan Place

