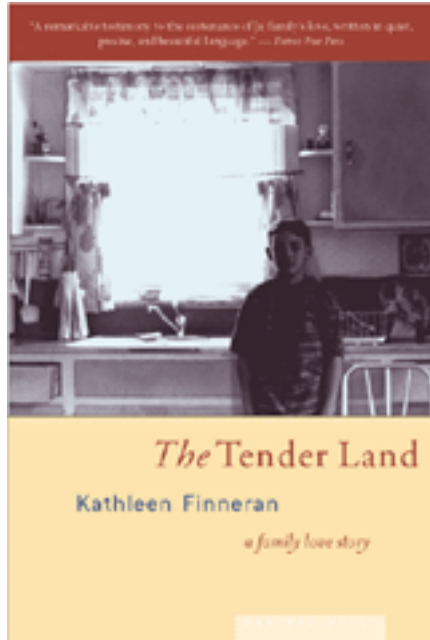


A Reader's Guide

The Tender Land

by Kathleen Finneran

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The Tender Land is a love story unlike any other. In her remarkable debut, Kathleen Finneran renders powerfully the emotional, spiritual, and physical terrain of familial relationships — their closeness and disconnection, their intimacy and estrangement, and their ultimate resilience. The Finnerans — parents and five children — are a seemingly ordinary family until their lives are forever altered by the death of the author's younger brother. His suicide at fifteen serves as a focal point for Finneran's spare and elegant portrait of her family, its sorrows and its joys. "With subtlety and grace and a heartbreaking compassion for the truth" (*Book*), Finneran pays tribute to the enduring love between parents and children, brothers and sisters.

"*The Tender Land* reminds us of how complicated, unique, and fragile an organism the family is." — *Boston Globe*

"Great writers change us. Kathleen Finneran fits in this niche . . . Her prose sings." — *USA Today*

"Beautifully written . . . Like life itself, this memoir evokes both sadness and joy." — *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Questions for Discussion

1. *The Tender Land* has been described as a testament to a family's love. As a family, in what ways are the Finnerans typical? In what ways are they unique? Do you consider their love for one another unusual?

2. Throughout the memoir, Kathleen Finneran observes the myriad ways in which the members of her family show their love for one another. "And that is the first thing I learned about love, lying as close as I could to my mother, knowing that in some way I was her safety, that in some way I was a good reason for her to finally get up" (page 30). Is this indeed love? In what other ways do the Finnerans depend on each other? How does their love sustain them?
3. *The Tender Land* is told in a series of vignettes presented in nonchronological order. Some have noted that the structure allows Finneran's story to unfold like a novel. How does the unique structure of the book allow her themes to develop and resonate? Why do you suppose Finneran chose to write her story as nonfiction rather than as a novel? Do you think the story would have been as moving if it had been written as fiction?
4. To augment her narrative, Finneran includes several documents within her text (the list of rivers, the list of clothes, and Sean's letter). How do they add to the story? Do they lend support to the memoir in a way that Finneran's recollections cannot?
5. Finneran writes of her earliest interactions with Sean: "I had found the first key to my fulfillment, the desire to be looked at in that way, and from that desire, the simple act, the mastery, of making something happen: the moss roses opening and closing, Sean falling asleep" (101). In what other ways does Kathleen strive to get the attention of her family members? In what way does the desire to make ourselves happy and to make others happy influence our every action? In what ways does it not?
6. "All my life, [my mother] was the one who defined me, who named my qualities — the good qualities and the bad — as if I would never see them myself or realize, without her words, who I was" (230). How is Kathleen defined, both literally and figuratively, by her loved ones? How do all members of a family tell each other who they are? How does the way in which our family members name or define us contribute to how we define or describe ourselves in the larger world?
7. Finneran writes of the allure of the backyard campouts with her siblings: "It was the night watch, the act of being alive, of being innocent and equal, as Michael and Mary and I once were, open and uninhibited, unaware that anything would ever come between us, that our bodies would develop, leading us away from our ignorance, our innocence, usurping our souls, separating us from one another, leaving us too self-conscious to reveal what we would once have revealed, just days ago, months ago, just hours earlier" (62). How does Kathleen's relationship with her siblings change over time? How does knowledge drive them apart? How does shared knowledge keep them together?
8. Religion is a central issue in *The Tender Land*. Finneran writes, "My mother believed in miracles, in the possibility of things being perfect. I had never experienced a miracle myself, but my mother had experienced many" (36). Do the two women define miracles similarly? How does her mother's faith compare to Kathleen's?

9. Kathleen and Sean play an ongoing word game pairing opposites. One of the themes explored in *The Tender Land* is the coexistence of opposites: love and loss, sex and death, childhood and adulthood, happiness and depression. Finneran writes, "I understood how loss and love could situate themselves inside you, like one indiscriminate emotion" (141). How does each of these sets of opposites come to be juxtaposed or blended together in Kathleen's experience? How is the theme of opposites further developed throughout the book?

10. Kathleen describes her depression by writing, "Even the happiest of memories made me sad. Happiness, sadness, joy, grief. They were all the same. They had become more like observations than emotions, things I could see and recognize and describe from a distance, but never fully feel" (87). How does the author create and maintain a kind of tone of depression, an environment of depression, throughout the memoir? How does she reveal the presence of depression in the Finneran family?

11. Michael says of watching his first eclipse, "I saw something . . . but I thought it would be better" (182). Did Michael expect too much from the eclipse, or did he simply fail to appreciate what was there? How does this compare to Mrs. Finneran's perspective on the natural world, her immense appreciation of the small things in life? How does this expression apply, as the author suggests, to Mr. Finneran's life? To what other events in *The Tender Land* could Michael's description be applied?

12. Kathleen observes, "My mother had been willing, again and again, to act in our interest, despite the pain it sometimes caused her. Was that the fundamental fact of motherhood?" (133) What are some examples of Mrs. Finneran's selfless acts on behalf of her children? How is the way Kathleen's mother acts similar to and different from the way her other family members behave out of love? Do we all act selflessly on behalf of those we love?

13. Kathleen recalls one of the first occasions when she knew she had disappointed her father: "We had betrayed our father's trust, something that had existed quietly and without notice until we disrupted the balance on which it was built" (179). Where else in *The Tender Land* is this balance disrupted? How are the Finnerans able to recover their equilibrium after such events? Do you think the Finnerans are unusually resilient?

14. Kathleen writes, "I was struck by the realization that someday I would fail my father, that I would betray him, if only by growing up" (185). Must we all fail our parents in some way? How so and how not?

15. It is commonly understood that there are five stages of grieving: denial, shock and isolation; anger; bargaining; depression; and, finally, acceptance. Does Kathleen go through all of these stages in the course of *The Tender Land*? How do the Finnerans exhibit some of these behaviors?

16. What is the effect of having the details of Sean's death doled out sparingly throughout the book? Would the details of his suicide seem more or less shocking if they were revealed the first time his death was mentioned?

17. Finneran writes, "Had we inadvertently said something to him that caused him to do what he did, something that altered the way he saw himself? One word — was that all it took? Uno, I thought. What if that was all it came down to?" (245) Is it possible, do you think, that something trivial could cause someone to commit suicide? Do you think the reasons for suicide that Sean offers in his letter are plausible? The question of why he killed himself is never fully answered or understood (by the reader or the writer); how does this affect your experience of reading the memoir?

18. "When hugging the dead, you would always be the first to let go. And the last" (138). Do you feel that, by the end of the book, Kathleen has been able to let go of Sean? Why or why not? In the final chapter of the book, Finneran shifts perspective and addresses Sean directly. Her voice and writing style change a bit also. Do you think these changes contribute to any sense of resolution or acceptance that the writer may have reached by the end of the book?

About Kathleen Finneran

Kathleen Finneran was born and raised in St. Louis. She is a graduate of Washington University. *The Tender Land* is her first book. Finneran has received a Whiting Award and a Guggenheim fellowship for her writing.

For Further Reading

The following books may also be of interest to readers of *The Tender Land*:

[*Atomic Farmgirl*](#) by Teri Hein

[*The Summer After June*](#) by Ashley Warlick

[*Crackpots*](#) by Sara Pritchard