

THE RACHEL INCIDENT

READING GROUP GUIDE

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Caroline O'Donoghue's *The Rachel Incident*, a searingly funny and provocative portrait of a unique friendship that's put to the test by betrayal, heartbreak, global economic crises, and a broken medical system.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Rachel tells her story in retrospect—years after the main events of the novel, when the circumstances of her life are radically different. How did you observe her “coming of age” over the course of the novel? What were the moments and people that shifted her perspectives on life and herself most dramatically? From the future “frame” of the narration, what can you tell she has learned from her youth?
2. In their own ways, Rachel and James both use writing as a way to make sense of their lives during the years they live together. How do Rachel's aspirations in publishing (and later journalism), and James's in screenwriting (with Michael and Alice), reflect their different approaches to that form of creative processing? Who gets the most out of this tactic in the end?
3. By extension, do you think the writing of this chronicle is part of Rachel's attempt at reinvention—even reconciliation—for what happened during those years?
4. What are the qualities of Dr. Byrne that appeal most to Rachel and James? Are they the same qualities, or different?
5. Rachel describes loving three different men—James, Carey, and Dr. Byrne—all at the same time. How do those versions of love differ? What does each man bring out in her? How do they help her grow, and where do they hold her back?
6. What might have happened if Rachel moved to New York with James instead of to London?
7. So much of the novel's conflict hinges on the circumstances of the global financial crisis of 2008. What does this suggest about the connections between love and money? Which moments in the characters' various relationships felt fueled by financial need, or served as business transactions?

8. There are certain universal aspects of being in one's twenties that James and Rachel go through—romance, finance, independence, identity—and yet the time in which their friendship develops and is tested has unique opportunities for hardship and self-expression. What does Rachel mean when she says “Dr. Byrne wanted to visit our youth, our poverty, our liveliness. But he didn't want to live there” (214)? Is she referring to those general qualities of youth, or more specific to their moment in time? Could you relate to any of their experiences, regardless of your age—and would you want to “live there” now?
9. Rachel's attitude toward her degree devolves over the course of the novel, as her career prospects and reputation at the university are sullied by the scandal with Dr. Byrne and Deenie. What does her degree do for her in the end? Does she think it was worth it—given how attending university introduced her to both James and Dr. Byrne, to the bookstore, to publishing, and all of the difficulties those pursuits engendered?
10. “The problem with genuine memories is that you know too much. It ruins everything,” writes Rachel (161). Does this hold true in her recollections that make up this book? Did this line make you question how “genuine” the memories she shares are?
11. When they reunite, Carey argues with Rachel about who ignored whom most in the last phases of their relationship, when she was pregnant and planning the abortion and he was at home caring for his mother. Who do you think was right—was Carey more absent and opaquer about his intentions, or was Rachel?
12. Over time, Rachel understands more of why Dr. Byrne and James might have been attracted to one another—a shared loneliness. How does each man address the social taboos and internal conflict surrounding their sexual identity? How much do you think is related to generational differences or differences in their personalities and support systems? Who do you think is happier with their choices in the end?
13. Why do you think James kisses Rachel after he comes out to his mother? How would you define the kind of love that they have?
14. How are women challenged and encouraged to express themselves in the novel, in contrast to the men? What is the role of motherhood—longing for it, fearing it—in Rachel and Deenie's sense of self, and how does that part of their identity affect their relationship?
15. Do you think Rachel would have gone through with the abortion if she didn't have a miscarriage?
16. Discuss James's and Carey's reactions to Rachel's pregnancy, in real time and later. How do you think Carey would have responded if he had found out earlier? What kind of support did James offer her that no one else could have?
17. Rachel reinvents herself in London, a relief after the ghosts of her past haunt her around the UCC campus. What about working at a bookstore frees her to embrace a new style, a new attitude, a new freedom? Why do you think that environment wasn't more triggering, given her former experience in bookstores?
18. At the end of the novel, Rachel reunites with Deenie and shares James's contact information to learn the story of him and Dr. Byrne. Do you think Deenie ever reached out? If so, how might you imagine that conversation going? At this stage in his life, would James have been open to telling the truth?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen
- *The Mothers* by Brit Bennett
- *How to Fall Out of Love Madly* by Jana Casale
- *The Clasp* by Sloane Crosley
- *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding
- *Friends Like Us* by Lauren Fox
- *Really Good, Actually* by Monica Heisey
- *The Farm* by Joanne Ramos
- *Normal People* by Sally Rooney
- *Romantic Comedy* by Curtis Sittenfeld
- *Circle of Friends* by Maeve Binchy
- *Last Chance Saloon* by Marian Keyes
- *Actress* by Anne Enright
- *Brother of the More Famous Jack* by Barbara Trapido
- *Le Divorce* by Diane Johnson