

Book Club Kit

The Heart in Winter

A
NOVEL

Author of
NIGHT BOAT
TO TANGIER



Kevin Barry



Doubleday

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Kevin Barry's *The Heart in Winter*, a story of an outlaw couple whose love shakes up their 1890s Montana town—and invokes the mysteries and wrath of nature.

Questions and Topics for Discussion



1. What aspects of Tom's personality make him suspect among the authorities of Butte? How might his more artistic and mystical interests have been received if he was living in a different time period?
2. Early in the novel, Tom thinks, "The prospect of death was a glamorous comfort but it did not hold for long" (17). How is this attitude a harbinger of Tom's fate in pursuit of romantic love?
3. When Tom falls for Polly, is he struck primarily by her as a person or by the idea of being in love and married? What does Tom promise to offer Polly as an alternative to her life as the wife of Anthony Harrington?
4. Discuss the drifter characters that Tom and Polly meet on the road. How does someone like the Reverend, who warns him about the dangers of "tiny creatures in our guts . . . [who] want us concentrated in the body and not in the Spirit," contribute to their disconnect from the real world (89)?
5. The townspeople describe Tom as having "a kind of witchery about him" (109). What events lead them to this conclusion? What does it mean during this time for a man to be labeled with that word?
6. Discuss Anthony's self-flagellation and rant about Tom—do you believe his rage is about losing Polly, or is it about the offense to his own masculine pride?

- 7.** What aspects of Irish culture have become embedded in Butte? Consider the idea that “soaked in an ambience of death from the cradle, they believed themselves generally to be on the way out, and sooner rather than later, and thus could be inclined to put aside the niceties of the living realm” (116). How does Tom embody this sentiment and outlook?
- 8.** Describe the couple’s connection to their horse. Why does selling her seem like such a betrayal? How does Tom anthropomorphize the horse in his mind and behaviors?
- 9.** How do you think the couple would have fared if Polly hadn’t been attacked by the Jacks? Would they have been able to settle down anywhere, or were they fated to a life on the run? What does their life suggest about the feasibility of the dream of the American West prominent during this time period?
- 10.** After the attack, the Swedish doctor says that Tom soaks up dope “like a sponge” (169). Although he’d been using drugs already, do you think his tolerance increased due to the circumstances, with both his physical and emotional pain requiring more numbing? What path might Tom have gone down if he lived in modern times?
- 11.** How does Tom’s relationship to spirituality change after he loses Polly? Consider what he expects from God when “he made himself stronger by force of belief. He spoke to God fiercely . . . He slept like the dead after that. There was no more dreaming” (171).
- 12.** How does the tone of the narrative shift once Polly’s perspective takes over? Does she suffer in the same way as Tom, knowing how he was injured, and eventually dies, trying to protect her?
- 13.** A man Tom meets on the road says, “You ain’t the sort has to go lookin for trouble, are you, son? . . . Just kinda finds you, don’t it?” (189). Does Tom welcome this aspect of his life circumstances? Does he try to avoid trouble? In the end, do you think Tom believed it was worth it to run away with Polly?
- 14.** Polly reflects, “Anyhow the past it shifts around all the time. The past is not fixed and it is not certain and this much she has learned if nothin else. The past it changes all the while every minute you’re still breathing and how in fuck are you supposed to make sense of it all” (242). How is the past changing for Polly? Do you think Tom will remain fixed in her memory, or has he already acquired a kind of mythology about him? What are the relief and the pain of having all of time—past, present, future—be unpredictable and fluid?

Dear Reader,

In late October of 1999, in a room at the Capri Motel in Butte, Montana, I sat dutifully over my notebook and attempted to begin my Butte, Montana novel. I'd been in town gathering material about the great Irish migration to the city in the 1880s and '90s, and I knew that I had a Western on my hands – a Western with Irish accents – and I was almost trembling with excitement at the notion. I'd been months researching the story back in Ireland, too, in County Cork, where the migration began when the old copper mines there played out, and I had bored my friends silly with talk of this Butte, Montana novel that was most assuredly on the way. I was talking about it too much, actually, and the talk betrayed a nervousness. There was a problem with my novel – I had texture and atmosphere and color but I had no characters.

Soon, and with much sadness, this first attempt at a novel was quietly put to one side, and I began to write other things. Twenty-two years passed by, and I wrote six other books, and



Olivia Smith

then the characters for my Butte, Montana novel suddenly appeared – I knew at once they were called Tom and Polly, I knew they were runaway lovers, and I knew that I could tune in to their conversation at will. The tone and musical note of the novel was coming through now as cleanly as a bell struck.

This is just how it is sometimes with a story. Sometimes it's a long game, and you have to wait it out. And now, a quarter of a century on from the room at the Capri Motel, my Butte, Montana novel is finally ready to meet its readers.

Kevin Barry

A PLAYLIST FOR
**The Heart in
Winter**

Believe Me, If All Those Endearing Young Charms

– John McCormack, Edwin Schneider

Tonight I Think I'm Gonna Go Downtown

– Jimmie Dale Gilmore

Sunshine On My Shoulders

– John Denver

Cello Suite No. 1 In G Major

– Bach

Somewhere

– Tom Waits

Gassenhauer

– Gunild Keetman

Girl From The North Country

- Bob Dylan & Johnny Cash

Wild Mountain Thyme

– Liam Clancy

Here, There And Everywhere

– The Beatles

Maggie In The Woods

– Toucan Pirates

Listen to the playlist [here](#)

Suggested Further Reading

City of Bohane by Kevin Barry

Train Dreams by Denis Johnson

Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver

Where Reasons End by Yiyun Li

The Morningside by Téa Obreht

Bad News by Edward St. Aubyn

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

Gold Fame Citrus by Claire Vaye Watkins

Stoner by John Williams