



STUTT GART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

Songs in Ordinary Time by Mary Morris McGarry

About This Book

Set in Atkinson, Vermont, during the steamy summer of 1960, the focus of this small world falls upon the Fermoyle family, headed by Marie, a divorcee. Framing the action is a murder committed by a travelling confidence trickster who preys on Marie's weaknesses and wheedles his way into her heart.

Discussion Questions

1. Omar Duvall is known to the reader as a dishonest and potentially dangerous man. Why do you think the people of Atkinson are drawn to such a reprehensible figure? What does he offer people like Marie, Benjy, Harvey Klubock, and Bernadette Mansaw? Why do these characters refuse to accept the truth about him, even when it's clearly evident that he has lied to them?
 2. How do you feel about the character of Marie Fermoyle? Given the circumstances she's had to face - the breakup of her marriage to the heir of a prominent family, the economic hardships she's endured, the scrutinizing eyes of neighbors and other members of the community - can you sympathize with her actions towards her children, Omar Duvall, and her ex-husband?
 3. Although most of the novel's characters are flawed, few of them are truly malevolent. Discuss, for instance, Renie LaChance's telephone calls to women, Sonny Stoner's affair with Eunice, Father Gannon's affair with Alice, Robert Haddad's thievery, and Sam's alcoholism. What do these characters, and their failings, have in common? What compels them in their actions?
 4. What do Joey Seldon and his popcorn stand represent to the novel and/or to the town of Atkinson? Why do you think people feel so strongly about Joey, one way or the other?
 5. How does Morris use humor to offset the darker events of the novel? Do her humorous passages make you more sympathetic toward characters such as Omar Duvall, Jarden Greene, or Astrid Haddad?
 6. Why do you think Norm, who had been Omar Duvall's greatest detractor, is taken in by the soap-selling scheme? How does Omar manage to manipulate Norm's feelings about him, and why, eventually, does he fail?
 7. What does Father Gannon mean when he tells Alice, "I realize that my faith has become a wholeness. It's a unity of mind and soul. And flesh...I finally feel like a real priest!" Do you think he really loves Alice? What does she give him and what, in turn, does he offer her?
 8. Omar insists that he truly loves Marie, despite all the ways in which he has deceived her. Do you believe him? Do you believe his involvement with the Fermoyle family has changed him? What clues does Morris offer, especially in the final scene involving Omar, Norm, and Benjy, that affect your feelings either way?
 9. How does the concept of salvation figure in the novel? Which characters can't be saved from their own desperate acts, and which are trying desperately to save themselves?
 10. What do you think the future holds for Marie Fermoyle and her family? How has the presence of Omar Duvall changed each of them, as well as their relationships with each other?
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Extras

Detailed Character Descriptions

In Mary McGarry Morris' intricately constructed novel, many lives intersect and connect, much like the strains of a symphonic ode. But it is the Fermoyle family who lends the story its resonance and presents the reader with a multitude of passions, ironies, tragedies, poor choices, and triumphs from which one can trace every element of the human condition. Marie Fermoyle's life is a daily struggle not only to feed and clothe her children, but to imbue them with the strength and determination she knows they will need to forge their way in the hardscrabble world they inhabit. And though she seems thwarted at every turn - by her alcoholic ex-husband's embarrassing public displays, her shabby eyesore of a house, the explosive temper of her oldest son, or the pathetic passivity of her youngest - Marie never gives up. Omar Duvall enters the lives of Atkinson's citizens with the impact of a car crashing through a plate glass window. Although he is deceitful, unctuous, and sly, he manages to ingratiate himself into the hearts and homes of the town's lost souls, as well as its more upstanding citizens. From Benjy's fervent belief that Omar, messiah-like, will rescue his mother from her profound unhappiness, to Bernadette Mansaw's pragmatic and untrusting embrace, to Marie's blind yearnings for the attentions of a man who seems truly devoted to her, the citizens of Atkinson find what they are looking for in Duvall's promises of wealth and good fortune. All it takes is a little faith, and a lot of their hard-earned cash. We find Atkinson on the brink of a new era. It's 1960 - a relatively calm year with only hints of the tumult and disorder - assassination, war, and civil unrest - that are near at hand. The complacent acceptance of authority that dominated the previous decade is coming to an end. The signs of economic imbalance, sexual freedom, and rebellion against the status quo are everywhere: in Father Gannon's un-priest like demeanor, in Renie LaChance's failing appliance store, in the provocative sway of Jessie Klubock's hips, in Carol Stoner's stoic acceptance of her husband's infidelity. These are ordinary people, and certainly Atkinson is a typical American town. But the struggles we witness during this long and eventful summer are as fundamental and epic as those found in the works of Dickens and Steinbeck. And as the citizens of Atkinson contend with their deepest fears and their strongest desires, they offer us an extraordinary portrait of the human condition at its most frail and its most triumphant. Taken individually their songs are bittersweet strains of disappointment and longing; together they form a lyrical masterwork of hope, perseverance and spirit. Cast of Characters Arkaday, Kathleen: Housekeeper at St. Mary's Rectory. Bonifante, Eunice: Runs luncheonette. Widow. Was married to brother of Mrs. Stoner. Brastus, Lucille: Landlady of the Menka twins. Runs Holy Articles Shoppe downstairs. Briscoe, Ferdinand: Marie Fermoyle's boss at Briscoe's Sporting Goods. Burke, Msgr. Thomas: Pastor, St. Mary's parish. Carper, Anthology: Cousin of Blue Mooney. A & X cook. Carper, Hildie: Mother of Blue Mooney, Kyle, Peter, and Carl. Carson, Grondine: Garbage man. Runs pig farm in the Flatts. Clay, Judge Henry: Attorney for Bridget Fermoyle. Long-ago Atkinson mayor. Corbett, Luther: Magazine-selling crew. Coughlin, Jerry: A & X manager. Doyle, Kenny: Foreman of Norm's work crew. Duvall, Omar: Itinerant salesman. Earle: Earl Lapham Jones. Magazine-selling crew. Grandson of

