That They May Face the Rising Sun – In Brief

Leaving their bustling London life behind, Joe and Kate Ruttledge have settled in a small lakeside community in Ireland. They have a farm, subsidised by Joe's writing, and their life follows a slow, gentle rhythm, in tune with the seasons. The small dramas and quiet satisfactions of everyday life fill their world: visits from their neighbour and dear friend the incorrigibly inquisitive Jamesie, lambing and selling their calves at the cattle mart, and visits to town to pick up supplies and local news.

John McGahern’s gentle, almost wistful, novel traces a year in the Ruttledges’ lives, introducing perceptively drawn and wonderfully memorable characters while painting quietly restrained yet evocative word pictures of a world in which each small change delicately re-distributes the balance of the whole.

Critical Reaction

'It is a simple and ordinary story, calmly, wryly crafted with subtle detail – and therein lies McGahern’s genius. As sharply, brilliantly observed as any he has written . . . McGahern, a supreme chronicler of the ordinary . . . has created a novel that lives and breathes as convincingly as the characters who inhabit it.' Irish Times

'As a description of rural life, unfolding as majestically as the seasons, it is quite exquisite . . . When nature is rendered as vividly as this, it changes the whole character of fiction: you see the wider universe of which the human drama is part.' Sunday Telegraph

'That They May Face the Rising Sun . . . stands McGahern above any contemporary Irish novelist.' The Times

'At last an Irish author has awakened from the nightmare of history and given us a sense of liberation which is not dependent on flight or emigration or escape.' Guardian

'Cloaked in the kind of wisdom that makes it translucent, not transparent . . . You have to sense, to intuit, to feel your way through the narrative, hear the intent behind the wonderful spin of voices.' Guardian
Background

Read and respected by writers as diverse as David Mitchell and John Updike, John McGahern is widely acknowledged as one of the finest Irish writers of his generation. He was not prolific – twelve years separate the publication of *Amongst Women*, the novel that first brought him critical acclaim, and *That They May Face the Rising Sun* – but his thoughtful, finely wrought novels were well worth the wait. The elegant but quiet restraint that characterises much of McGahern’s writing is a delicate counterpoint to the sometimes lyrical sentences that bejewel his work.

McGahern’s writing has a very precise character, the product of the meticulous paring down of his prose. His carefully crafted novels perfectly capture both place and time. In the words of fellow Irish author Colm Tóibín, who has described McGahern as ‘the Irish novelist everyone should read’, McGahern ‘has established the notion of a small place becoming a whole world’ and it is that quality which characterises McGahern’s evocative depiction of an isolated seemingly timeless community in *That They May Face the Rising of the Sun*. The academic and writer Declan Kiberd also sees McGahern as an important literary figure particularly in chronicling Irish rural life explaining that ‘In a way I think he sees himself as an elegist. What he is interested in is that moment just before a culture dies away, when it achieves a kind of grace of utterance, a sort of swansong and in some ways his writings are that swansong for a rural way of life which lasted for decades but is now almost gone.’ Perhaps it is the string of telephone poles around the lake that mark that particular moment of passage in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*.

In 2005 McGahern published *Memoir*, the autobiographical work which makes clear the influence of his early life on his work. His beloved mother, Susan, died young from cancer leaving her children in the care of his father, a bullying self-absorbed policeman whose character will seem familiar to readers of both *Amongst Women* and *The Barracks*. That influence can also be seen in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* but in a much gentler form.

He and his second wife Madeline Green bought a farm in County Leitrim in 1970 and returned from England to settle in Ireland. McGahern concluded that ‘in hindsight the farm was a foolish idea. I thought it would be a place where I could write and we could live cheaply. In fact now it is the writing that keeps the animals in high style. They’ve become more pets than anything else’, a sentiment echoed by the exasperated slaughterhouse men trying to herd the Rutledges’ sheep. But if his earlier novels reflected the stark severity of his own younger years, this novel has a quiet meditative quality, the work of a man who has faced down his demons and found peace with himself.

McGahern’s death in March 2006 was greeted with sadness in the literary press which seemed genuinely moved by the loss of this modest man. Perhaps it is the intimacy and lingering affection with which he describes the lakeside community of *That They May Face the Rising Sun* or the unflinching exploration of his unhappy early years in *The Barracks* and *Amongst Women* that made McGahern’s readers feel that they knew him and so particularly felt his loss.

Faber Book Club Guides: That They May Face the Rising Sun
For Discussion

• ‘I never thought they’d last out, every year I come home expecting to find them gone’ (page 79). How well do Joe and Kate Rutledge fit into the community given how different they are from the other characters? How different is their perspective from that of the characters who have always lived by the lake, or from Johnny’s? How do the locals see them? What has drawn them back to Ireland from England? What made them leave?

• ‘I’ve never, never moved from here and I know the whole world’ declares Jamesie (page 7). How well would you say Jamesie knows the world? Why, despite his boundless interest in events around him, is he so uneasy about the wider world?

• ‘We’d be lost without Jamesie’ (page 46) Rutledge tells Patrick. Is Jamesie as well loved by all? What do others think of him? Why is he so important to Kate and Rutledge?

• Jamesie is one of several expertly drawn and memorable characters. What are the qualities of John McGahern’s writing that bring his characters so vividly to life?

• “You should know me well enough by now,” he laughed and grew light. “I don’t count. I’m just a sort of comedian in the crowd” (page 68). Do you agree with Patrick’s assessment of himself? How would you describe him?

• What accounts for the troubled relationship between Jamesie, Mary and their son Jim?

• ‘As he listened to the two voices he was so attached to and thought back to the afternoon, the striking of the clocks, the easy, pleasant company, the walk around the shore, with a rush of feeling, he felt this must be happiness. As soon as the thought came to him, he fought it back, blaming it on the whiskey’ (page 192). Why does Joe thrust his thoughts of happiness away?

• ‘The timid, gentle manners, based on fragile interdependence, dealt in avoidances and obfuscations. Edges are softened, ways found round harsh realities’ (page 195). Jamesie and Mary must find a way to turn Johnny away without causing hurt or offence. How important are such ‘avoidances and obfuscations’ in preserving good relations? What other examples are there of such behaviour?

• ‘If his black gear hasn’t a place in the cattle mart, it hasn’t a place anywhere else either. It either belongs to life or it doesn’t’ (page 237). How does Rutledge’s attitude to religion compare with Jamesie’s, and with Patrick’s? How important is religion in the community?

• Jimmy Joe McKiernan is the leader of the local contingent of the Provisional IRA and mention of Enniskillen, just across the border, is made several times. How is the impact of the Troubles and of Ireland’s history treated in the novel?

• McGahern frequently describes the natural world in the novel. How important is nature in the book, and the various characters’ relationship with it?

• The novel has no real plot and is not divided into chapters; it is more a gently flowing meditation on life in a small rural community. What did you think of its structure? How satisfying did you find it? How would you describe the tone of the narrative? How important is McGahern’s use of language?

• What do you think is the significance of the novel’s title? How appropriate did you find it?

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About the Author

John McGahern was born in Dublin in 1934 and was brought up in the West of Ireland. He graduated from the University College, Dublin and became a primary school teacher before taking up writing full-time. He left his job after the Irish Censorship Board banned his second novel, The Dark, which was condemned as pornographic and denounced from the pulpit in the 1960s. He also taught at universities in the USA, Canada, England and Ireland and wrote plays for radio, television and the stage.

Amongst Women was shortlisted for the 1990 Booker Prize, won the Irish Times Award and was adapted into a four-part BBC television series. In 2005 McGahern published his autobiography, the critically acclaimed Memoir. He died from cancer on March 30th 2006.

Suggested Further Reading

On the Black Hill by Bruce Chatwin
Middlemarch by George Eliot
Plainsong by Kent Haruf
The Dead by James Joyce
Charming Billy by Alice McDermott
The Heather Blazing by Colm Tóibín

Other Books by John McGahern

Fiction
The Barracks
The Dark
The Leavetaking
The Pornographer
Amongst Women

Short story collections
Nightlines
Getting Through
High Ground
The Power of Darkness
The Collected Stories

Non-fiction
Memoir

Resources

http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,631225,00.html
Review by Seamus Deane published in the Guardian

http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,627748,00.html
Profile by Nicolas Wroe published in the Guardian

http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,628040,00.html
Interview with Robert McCrum published in the Observer

Obituary published in the Telegraph

http://books.guardian.co.uk/news/articles/0,,1743617,00.html
Obituary by Richard Pine published in the Guardian

www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,60-2112968,00.html
Obituary in The Times
Other Reading Guides . . .

In the Fold Rachel Cusk
The Poisonwood Bible Barbara Kingsolver
The Remains of the Day Kazuo Ishiguro
Mrs Fytton's Country Life Mavis Cheek
Headlong Michael Frayn
Amongst Women John McGahern
Snow Orhan Pamuk
Real Stephanie Merritt
The Observations Jane Harris
The Bell Jar Sylvia Plath
The Confessions of Max Tivoli Andrew Sean Greer

and more to follow . . .

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