Amongst Women
by John McGahern

Amongst Women – In Brief

Desperate to pull their dying father back from the brink, the Moran sisters decide to recreate Monaghan day, the day of his annual reunion with his old colleague McQuaid, the day when he always seemed at his best. An IRA veteran, so disenchanted that he now welcomes his Protestant neighbours, Moran has long exerted a powerful influence over his daughters, continually drawing them back to the family home despite their departures to Dublin and London and the beginnings of their own families. Not so their elder brother Luke who remains resolutely outside the family circle while their younger brother Michael struggles to free himself. This turbulent family is gently restrained by the presence of Rose, Moran's second wife whose quiet forbearance has become a mainstay of the sisters' lives. Written in spare, unadorned yet sometimes lyrical prose, John McGahern's novel depicts a family bound tightly and painfully to a tyrannical patriarch.

Background

John McGahern is widely acknowledged as one of the finest Irish writers of his generation. Although he had already published six novels, the second of which – The Dark – was denounced from the pulpit, condemned as pornographic and banned in Ireland in the 1960s, it was Amongst Women that brought an abundance of critical acclaim. He is not a prolific writer – twelve years separate the publication of Amongst Women and his next major work That They May Face the Rising Sun – but each of his thoughtful, finely wrought novels is well worth the wait. The quiet restraint that characterises much of McGahern's writing is a delicate counterpoint to the sometimes lyrical sentences that bejewel his prose.

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 Amongst Women.

With his disgust at those in charge of the newly formed Republic of Ireland, Moran also echoes the character of Reegan, the embittered IRA veteran of McGahern's first novel The Barracks, whose wife Elizabeth is dying of breast cancer. Critics have commented that Moran's retreat from his youthful exploits in the IRA into a vice-like grip on his household can be seen as a political metaphor, 'a diminished form of home rule', as one has described it. McGahern has said of the novel: 'The whole country is made up of families, each family a kind of independent republic. In Amongst Women, the family is a kind of half-way house between the individual and the society.'

Published in 1990, Amongst Women remains McGahern's best-known novel, read and revered by writers as diverse as David Mitchell and John Updike, while fellow Irish author Colm Tóibín has described McGahern as 'the Irish novelist everyone should read.'
For Discussion . . .

• ‘Though he had lived for weeks for this hour he now felt a wild surge of resentment towards McQuaid as he came into his own house’ (page 11). What is the significance of the relationship between Moran and McQuaid? How important has his role in the IRA been in forming Moran’s character, and his attitude towards his children?

• ‘On this his wedding day he seemed strangely at peace. It was as if he needed this quality of attention to be fixed upon him in order to be completely silent’ (page 45). What kind of man is Moran? Why has he chosen to set himself apart from the small community in which the family lives?

• ‘They say he’s one sort of person when he’s out in the open among people – he can be very sweet – but that he’s a different sort of person altogether behind the walls of his own house’ (page 24). Rose’s mother repeatedly warns her against marrying Moran. Why is she so desperate to do so, despite his apparent reluctance? What sort of marriage do they share? How is Rose changed by it?

• How does Moran feel about his daughters? How do they feel about him? Why are they continually drawn back to Great Meadow despite the difficulties of their relationship with him? How do the dynamics of the Moran household change when the sisters leave?

• ‘Sheila met his laughter with a withering stare. He might be allowed through her into the family but it did not mean that he belonged. No outsider was allowed to laugh at anything so sacrosanct as the family’ (page 123). What does the family mean to each of the Morans?

• What has provoked Luke’s departure from Great Meadow? How does his absence affect the rest of the family? To what extent are things resolved between father and son? Why has Michael not followed in his footsteps?

• ‘. . . as they left him under the yew, it was as if each of them in their different ways had become Daddy’ (page 183). How is each of the daughters like her father? Why did he become afraid of them before his death?

• What part does religion play in the novel?

• How would you describe the style and tone of McGahern’s prose?
Resources

http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,1557758,00.html
Interview by Sean O'Hagan on Memoir in the Guardian

www.studiesirishreview.com/articles/2001/010304i.htm
Interview by Eamon Maher on Catholicism and national identity in McGahern’s writing

Short essay on Amongst Women by Liam Harte published at the Literary Encyclopedia

Suggested Further Reading

Grace Notes by Bernard MacLaverty
A Thousand Acres by Jane Smiley
The Blackwater Lightship by Colm Tóibín
After Rain by William Trevor

Other Books by John McGahern

Fiction
The Barracks
The Dark
Nightlines
The Leavetaking
Getting Through
The Pornographer
By the Lake
That They May Face the Rising Sun

Short Story Collections
High Ground
The Power of Darkness
The Collected Stories
Island: Collected Stories

Non-fiction
Memoir

About the Author

John McGahern was born in Dublin in 1934 and was brought up in the West of Ireland. He is a graduate of 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, published in 1965. He has taught at universities in America, Canada, England and Ireland and has written 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 lives and farms in County Leitrim.