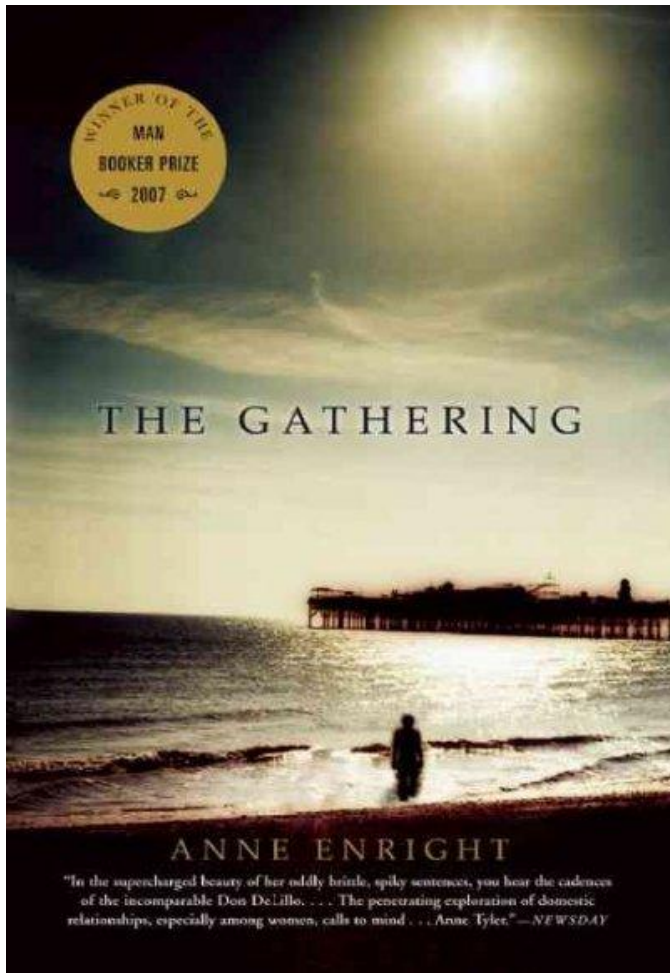


About the book ...

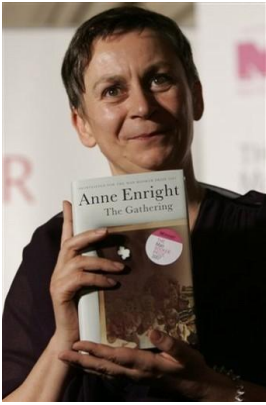


The nine surviving children of the Hegarty clan gather in Dublin for the wake of their wayward brother Liam. It wasn't the drink that killed him — although that certainly helped — it was what happened to him as a boy in his grandmother's house, in the winter of 1968. His sister Veronica was there then, as she is now: keeping the dead man company, just for another little while.

The Gathering is a family epic, condensed and clarified through the remarkable lens of Anne Enright's unblinking eye. It is also a sexual history: tracing the line of hurt and redemption through three generations — starting with the grandmother, Ada Merriman — showing how memories warp and family secrets fester. This is a novel about love and disappointment, about thwarted lust and limitless desire, and how our fate is written in the body, not in the stars.

The Gathering sends fresh blood through the Irish literary tradition, combining the lyricism of the old with the shock of the new. As in all Anne Enright's work, fiction and non-fiction, this is a book of daring, wit and insight: her distinctive intelligence twisting the world a fraction, and giving it back to us in a new and unforgettable light.

About the Author...



Anne Enright was born in Dublin in 1962, studied English and Philosophy at Trinity College, Dublin, and went on to study for an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. She is a former RTE television producer.

Her short stories have appeared in several magazines including *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review*, and she won the 2004 Davy Byrnes Irish Writing Award for her short story, 'Honey'. Her short story collection, *The Portable Virgin* was published in 1991, and won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. Two collections of stories, *Taking Pictures* and *Yesterday's Weather* were published in 2008.

Her novels are *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), shortlisted for the Irish Times/Aer Lingus Irish Literature Prize; *What Are You Like?* about twins separated at birth who meet when they are 25, winner of the 2001 Encore Award and shortlisted for the 2000 Whitbread Novel Award; *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002); and *The Gathering* (2007) about a large Irish family gathering for the funeral of a wayward brother. *The Gathering* won the 2007 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

Anne Enright has also published a book of humorous essays, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004). She lives in Ireland.

Reviews

Booklist /*Starred Review*/

The blessing and the curse of family bonds have been addressed by some of our best writers, perhaps never so movingly as by William Kennedy in his Albany cycle of novels. Now Irish novelist Enright, whose intense lyrical style recalls Kennedy's, gives full voice to another tale of familial agony: Veronica's grief in the wake of her wayward brother Liam's suicide. Past and present merge as Veronica recalls their childhood growing up in Dublin in a family of 14, with never enough money or enough attention from their overburdened parents. She's convinced it all went wrong when Liam was sexually abused by a family friend, and her recollections of that day alternate with sunnier ones of their endless roughhousing and joking. When Liam drowned himself, with a tide of "blood, sea water and whiskey" running in his veins, he took Veronica's sense of purpose with him. Inconsolable, and suffering from insomnia, she spends her evenings driving and writing, trying to come to terms with the fact that "someone you love is dead, and the world is full of people you don't." Enright's hypnotic prose turns her desperation into something fierce and beautiful. -- *Wilkinson, Joanne* (Reviewed 08-01-2007) (*Booklist*, vol 103, number 22, p35)

Publishers Weekly

In the taut latest from Enright (*What Are You Like?*), middle-aged Veronica Hegarty, the middle child in an Irish-Catholic family of nine, traces the aftermath of a tragedy that has claimed the life of rebellious elder brother Liam. As Veronica travels to London to bring Liam's body back to Dublin, her deep-seated resentment toward her overly passive mother and her dissatisfaction with her husband and children come to the fore. Tempers flare as the family assembles for Liam's wake, and a secret Veronica has concealed since childhood comes to light. Enright skillfully avoids sentimentality as she explores Veronica's past and her complicated relationship with Liam. She also bracingly imagines the life of Veronica's strong-willed grandmother, Ada. A melancholic love and rage bubbles just beneath the surface of this Dublin clan, and Enright explores it unflinchingly. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed July 23, 2007) (*Publishers Weekly*, vol 254, issue 29, p40)

Library Journal

It seems that large, extended families are brought together for two events, weddings and funerals, and such is the case in Enright's new novel (after *The*

Pleasure of Eliza Lynch) when Veronica, her eight surviving siblings, and their mammy reconnect for her wayward brother Liam's funeral. As Veronica notes early on, "the seeds of my brother's death were sown many years ago," and it is those seeds, which are gradually unearthed as the book moves between past and present, describing the deconstruction of the family, that drove Liam to suicide. From a description of vodka with a "sweet and crotch-like" smell that includes a "waft of earth and adolescence" to souls that, if released, would "slop out over his teeth," Enright's writing is starkly descriptive, using the same coarse imagery that is part of her characters' daily lives. Much is raw in this novel, which is less about individuals than about people's "patience and ability to endure." While readers won't be drawn to the characters, anyone who perseveres will find a story of harsh redemption and of a future found in a child's blue eyes. An acquired taste; recommended for larger and more diverse collections

Kirkus Reviews /* Starred Review */

A lyrical meditation on memory and connectedness involving three generations of an Irish family.

In her fourth novel (*The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch*, 2003, etc.), Enright seamlessly melds past and present, childhood and struggling maturity, death and

earthy life, in Veronica Hegarty's looping account of her blood line. Her mother bore 12 children and suffered seven miscarriages, yet it is a single death, of Veronica's troubled older brother Liam, which pulls the narrative together. The discovery of his body in the sea at Brighton (an English resort town) with stones in his pockets triggers a kind of breakdown in Veronica. It ignites a long-brewing crisis in her marriage, and it releases a flood of memories: Liam visiting her after the birth of one of her two daughters; Liam on a childhood trip to the seaside via a visit to a relative in an insane asylum; Liam being sexually abused by Nugent, a friend of their grandparents, Ada and Charlie. Veronica's insomnia after the bereavement leads her to start writing a version of Ada's life, speculating on an affair between Ada and Nugent. Veronica's own sexual history plays a part too, as well as her hunger for "a larger life." Like Ali Smith, Enright is an original. Her poetic, often lovely phrasing and surprising perspectives create a distinctive mood, and her novel subtly links the Hegartys in a chain of damage, regret and finally continuity.

A dreamy, melancholy swirl of a story, wise about the bonds and burdens linking children to each other and their grown selves.

Literary Criticism

Title: Anne Enright, *The Gathering*
Author(s): Hedwig Schwall
Source: ***Irish University Review: a journal of Irish Studies***. 37.2 (Autumn-Winter 2007): p594.
From *Literature Resource Center*.
Document Type: Book review

Anne Enright, *The Gathering*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007. x + 261 pages. EUR 18.45.

Enright's *The Gathering* brings not only twelve siblings together (throughout the book, biblical overtones abound) but also many sociopolitical, moral, and religious issues. In its play with literal and metaphorical meanings, this proves another vintage Enright novel, like *The Wig My Father Wore*, which started with an original kind of 'angel in the house' and ended with a protagonist who does not cry over spilt milk. One of the refreshing aspects of Enright's writing is that though her action is firmly situated in Ireland, the Irish situation is being looked at awry, as Žižek would put it. The figure of Lamb Nugent may be married to Kathleen and have four kids 'in his grim way' (p.103), but the old symbolism is not pressed much further. The novel focuses on basic, universal questions, like the ways in which the memory works, and generates meditations on the origin of evil and on possible modes of an afterlife.

With such issues to deal with it is no wonder that the protagonist is not only a writer, but one called

Veronica, like the woman who caught the 'vera icon', the true image of God's incarnation. Can any other name set a writer a more demanding task? Yet Enright's narrator proves to be 'a phenomenal heroine', in the sense that, in her urge to come to terms with her favourite brother's suicide, Veronica shirks no horrors, neither physical nor epistemological ones. Liam's sad life and sorry death suddenly shock Veronica into an awareness that until now she had lived her life 'in inverted commas', that is, she had led a stereotypical middle-class existence, 'a lifetime of false intensities' (p.120) which is summed up in the litany 'Oatmeal, cream, sandstone, slate', repeated three times throughout the book. Instead of concentrating on the real-estate boom in Dublin the narrator now tries to pick her way through the moments of hatred, desire, and love she feels for her family, looking alternately for a logical explanation of Liam's life, a psychological one, and a religious one.

As the body must be transferred from England (Liam ended his dark life in Brighton), waked and buried, administrative and ritual concerns allow the narrator to try out a causal explanation for this suicide. This is not easy: all Veronica can go by is 'an uncertain event' she feels 'roaring inside me' (p.1). This urgent but blurred feeling is connected with the eight-year-old narrator's memory of coming upon her brother Liam while he is being interfered with by Lamb Nugent, the landlord of her grandmother, Ada. The adult expression of the childhood impression is

interesting: Liam holding Nugent's member forms a 'bridge of flesh between the man and boy' (p.144). This rather poetic image of child abuse epitomizes the narrator's preoccupation: how is life passed on in families and between generations? That the 'bridging function' is demonized is all in character with the narrator's sympathy for Liam who turned out a messer. So, Veronica thinks this event 'is crucial' 'to my brother's life'; 'it is the place where all cause meets all effect, the crux of the X'. Yet this same causality is dismissed immediately: 'In a way, it explains too much' (p.224). At the wake Veronica accuses their mother who was so absent-minded that she was absent altogether: 'you were not there to comfort or protect him, and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box downstairs' (p.213). But again any logical link between child neglect and Liam's suicide is found wanting: 'Because a mother's love is God's greatest joke ... who is to say what is the first and what is the final cause?' (p.213).

Indeed it turns out that not so much logical but psychological factors yield a more plausible story, where the three principles of repetition, imitation, and interaction prove to be predominant. First, the narrator suggests that Nugent's lack of distance may be due to a pattern in his own family, as he played around with his sister Lizzie (p.35, p.215). This lack of 'the right distance', Veronica assumes, may well have been a problem in most families, which is underscored

by the fact that their school was named after St Dymphna who had to escape from her own father. Second, Veronica's writing leads her to believe that she, too, has been traumatized by some sexual assault, which reminds her of two other instances where men thrust themselves at her. This brings us to the third principle, that of interaction between past and present, which Freud calls 'deferred action'. Veronica herself gives the perfect definition of this phenomenon: 'You know everything at eight, but it is hidden from you, sealed up, in a way you have to cut yourself open to find' (p.147). Indeed, as the eight-year-old witnessed a 'relation' which had no relation to the rest of her world, she registered it without understanding it. The impact of this 'registration', however, is deferred until an event in the present lights the fuse, which is exactly what happens to Veronica: 'Over the next twenty years ... I never would have made that shift on my own--if I hadn't been listening to the radio, ... and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too' (p.173).

But interactions are not just at work between past and present, but also between victim and victimizer: 'I could also say that Liam must have wanted him too. Or wanted something' (p.223) and between observed and observer. The fact that history never stops 'sliding around in my head' (p.13) makes the narrator

a participator in the events, so that she can hear Nugent accusing her of phantasizing herself into misery: 'Now look at what you've got' (p.224). The 'interactional' principle gives a further twist to the name 'Veronica' when we learn that she is not only 'attracted to people who suffer' (p. 129), but she also makes people suffer, when she shocks her lover by her self-mutilation or when she flees her own family. But maybe most essential is the ongoing interaction between Veronica and Liam, which informs the narrator's 'unreliability'. That Veronica intermittently identifies with Liam's hatred of their mother and of Mossie becomes apparent in the way she describes them when she is still in shock about Liam's death. It is only during the rituals of his wake that they appear as thoughtful, balanced people. Another clue to Veronica's bias is her own observation that 'When Liam got into detail, I knew he was lying, also that he was starting to convince himself' (p.122). This throws an interesting light on her extra-vivid descriptions of the sexual innuendo or plain action between Ada and Nugent, and of the Liam-Nugent scene, of which the narrator herself admits that this 'may be a false memory' (p.144). But whereas 'false' details convincingly depict the narrator, there are some (very few) passages which remain unconvincing. One occurs when she insinuates that her grandmother and her landlord use biblical pet names: 'as they sometimes said, Nolly May Tangerine--from the "Do not touch me" of the Bible' (p.250).

Psychology is not a question of truth but of an underlying consistency. This, however, does not suffice for a writer like Veronica, so she brings in the religious dimension. References to the Old and New Testaments abound, but significantly only in confused form: the apocryphal Veronica is mixed up with both the bleeding woman whose touching of Jesus healed her, and with Mary Magdalene, whom Christ forbade to touch him. Indeed, Veronica is all about touching upon reality, and thereby producing a touching image. That which happens in and under the skin is something both 'Vee' and Liam had in common: 'the place Liam worked best was under your skin' (p.125). Only, while Liam's work is merely physical or detrimental, Veronica seems to find three vital factors of Christian belief anchored in her body: the question of original sin, of reconciliation, and of resurrection. Let us start with the act of forgiving. As this supersedes both causal and psychological thinking, forgiving is very hard for a matter-of-fact person like Veronica, so in one of her litanies she insists 'I do not forgive' (pp.7-8). The fact that she repeats this seven times is again a reference challenging the Bible's order to forgive seven times. Yet in the end she does forgive, even the family's 'Urmutter', Ada: 'But I do not blame her. And I don't know why that is.' (p.223) This is where original sin comes in: Ada is pictured as bringing life into the world and thereby death and all other mysteries and imperfections. (I wonder why Ada was made into an orphan; as a foundling she would

have made an even more powerful symbol?) Just so, the parents' love act which creates both life and chaos has something ambiguous and utterly ironical: 'My father ... had sex ... not for the pleasure of it, so much as to make it all stop' (p.228). The italicized point nicely echoes Yeats's 'Consolation': 'But where the crime's committed /The crime can be forgot.' But falling into human imperfection is exactly what the narrator will do herself at the end, and the literal meaning gets another metaphorical twist: 'Gatwick airport is not the best place to be gripped by a fear of flying. But it seems that this is what is happening ... I have been falling into my own life ... And I am about to hit it now' (p.261). Not only has Veronica now understood the unreliable, shifting nature of her family icons, but she believes she may incarnate them, as she is expecting a baby, which is one of many hints at a new understanding of resurrection.

After the (psycho)logical and the religious aspect it is only proper to end on the aesthetic aspect of Enright's novel. She writes in a dense, accurate, shocking, and humorous style. She has antennae to catch the almostness Rilke specialized in, and combines this with the suggestive epistemology of John Banville, the witty distance of A. L. Kennedy, the physicality of Jeannette Winterson, and the incisiveness of Sylvia Plath. One could almost say that her prose is more anatomy than analysis, which is underscored by the many *partes pro toto* the narrator somehow shares with the narratee, Liam, who used to 'put cancerous

lumps into bags and carried severed limbs down to the incinerator' (p.39). Directness of experience is enhanced by onomatopoeia, which, surprisingly, often differs between languages. When baby Stevie has little angel sex, they all 'make little noises when they kiss. It sounds just like their name. Putti. Putti. Putti' (pp.186-7). I have clearly no angel ears, as I do not recognize the sound. But I do recognize the angelic Stephen from Enright's first novel, who strongly contrasts with Veronica's demonic brother. Between her first and her last novel, Enright is widening her range, and building up a consistent oeuvre that is absolutely outstanding.

Schwall, Hedwig

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Schwall, Hedwig. "Anne Enright, *The Gathering*." *Irish University Review: a journal of Irish Studies* 37.2 (2007): 594+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 18 July 2011.

Discussion questions

1. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator, Veronica, states that she is setting out to "bear witness to an uncertain event" from her childhood. Begin your discussion of this novel by considering the nature of truth, and the ways in which it is possible or impossible to reach the truth in remembering stories

from our childhood. Do you think it is more important for Veronica to arrive at the truth or to uncover the stories and memories that might hold clues to her childhood? How far do you think she succeeds in reaching an approximate truth? Consider her statement “I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth” (p. 2) – and discuss its implications.

2. In many ways she is disturbing the ghosts of the past as she sifts through her stories and “night thoughts” (p. 2). Look at the ways in which these ghosts manifest themselves physically throughout the novel. How does the ghost or presence of her brother, Liam, make itself felt, if at all?

3. The novel eloquently explores the landscape of grief and the ways in which a death inevitably brings up memories and questions about the past. Talk about Veronica’s immediate responses to Liam’s death, and compare and contrast her mother’s reactions. Discuss the responses of the various other siblings. Why is Veronica irritated by her mother’s grief, and the fact that she has to go through the notions of comforting her? What does she mean when she says “Who am I to touch, to handle, and discard, the stuff of a mother’s love?” (p. 11).

4. The mother is an overwhelming presence at the center of the novel, not by the force of her own

character but more so by Veronica's bitterness towards her. Analyze the mother's place in the novel, and talk about the level of Veronica's anger toward her. What will she not forgive her mother and why? Discuss the possible reasons for her statement "the imponderable pain of my mother against which I have hardened my heart" (p. 185). Does her opinion of her mother shift at all during the novel? Does she ever feel a moment of love for her?

5. In light of the last question, consider the central role of forgiveness and guilt in the novel and the hold it has over the characters. Analyze especially Veronica's relationship with her brother Liam, and her belief in forgiving the dead. Why do you think Liam made her feel guilty about her life with her husband and her daughters? Talk about the effect of Liam's death on her relationship with her husband, and with the life she has created for herself.

6. Compare Veronica's upbringing with that of her own two daughters, and her parenting style with that of her mother. Reflect upon the emptiness she feels in her life, the sadness it causes her, and how it will impact her daughters. Are there instances in her own life that reflect her mother's? Consider the implications of Veronica's worries about her children's well-being and talk about whether over-parenting serves them better than the lack of parenting she received from her mother.

7. Consider the strength that Veronica exhibits during the period after Liam's death. At one point, she says, "I am all for sadness . . . but we fill up with it . . . until *donk*, we tilt into the drink" (p 175). Indeed, at points she seems to be plunging down Liam's path of drinking and despair, and yet she keeps herself from making the plunge. Analyze the ways in which Liam has given into this despair, and the ways in which Veronica rails against it. What are some of the sources from which she derives her strength? Why was Liam unable to draw upon the same reserves in his battle with depression? Do Veronica's humor and irreverence have a place in the midst of such grief?

8. "I am the one who loved him most." Veronica repeats this line as she undertakes the practical duties of death (arranging for bringing Liam's body home). It seems that she considers her close relationship with Liam as a burden. Are there other characters in the novel for whom love is a burden? Talk about Uncle Val's comment at Liam's wake, "Ah well. We did our best" (p. 203). What realization does it bring to Veronica? Discuss the responsibilities of filial and sibling love.

9. "There was great privacy in a big family . . . no one ever pitied you or loved you a little" (p. 164). Analyze this interesting statement, and talk about how the Hegarty family's character and, perhaps, destinies

were shaped by the sheer number of children in the family. On occasion, Veronica refers to the Hegartys as a group, a particular type who share certain characteristics – what are some of their traits? She also considers them all as damaged (p. 222) – how far do you agree with her view?

10. Liam's death serves as a catalyst for Veronica as she launches herself in pursuit of childhood memories, searching for the moment that set Liam off course in his life and steered him toward an early death. She states "What is written for the future is written in the body" (p. 163). What does she mean by this statement and how much do you agree? Could she have done anything to avert his suicide? To what extent do you think she has lived with guilt about Liam's abuse since her childhood, or do you believe the memories have only resurfaced after his death?

11. Discuss the reasons why she begins to view her life with her husband and children in a new and unpalatable light? Is her sudden change of heart valid? How far do you sympathize with her? What view do you begin to shape of her husband? What are your feelings toward him?

12. Early on in the novel Veronica states, "There are so few people given us to love." What do you think she means by this and how is this opinion reflected in the narrative? Certainly, the novel expressively touches upon and considers many different forms of

love. Expand upon the ways in which the Hegartys are bound together by love. Look at the marriage of Veronica's parents and find instances of love there as well as in the marriage of Ada and Charlie. Consider the bonds between the siblings and the way they interact with each other as adults. And what about the "easy, anxious love" a child feels for her grandfather?

13. The character of Ada seems to provide a key to Veronica's – and Liam's – past, and she is portrayed with far more detail than any other character. What do we know for sure about Ada? Analyze her relationship with her husband, Charlie, considering the statement "We do not always like the people we love" (p. 110). How much of the relationship between Ada and Lamb Nugent is invented? What do you understand of the relationship between Ada, Charlie, and Lamb? What do you think we are supposed to surmise? At what point does Veronica realize that Lamb was her grandparent's landlord and how does that change her view of events that took place that summer?

14. In a novel of "shifting stories and waking dreams" (p. 142) Veronica searches for the memory of her brother's abuse, and tries to pinpoint her grandmother's role in it. Does she ever come to a true understanding of this? Do her feelings for her grandmother change? What about her mother's place

in all this? Consider the childhood mantra, “Don’t tell mammy,” and talk about how much you think the mother knew.

15. Veronica says “Liam’s fate was written in his bones” (p.163). Do you think she believes that Liam’s fate was set in motion that fateful summer?

16. Veronica seems to be searching for some sort of truth, a conclusion, but states at one point “The only things I am sure of are the things I never saw” (p. 62). Again, on p. 91 she says that there is something “immoral about the mind’s eye.” What truths has her internal journey brought her? How has her journey into the past paralleled her journey to pick up Liam’s body and bring it back to Ireland for burial? To whom does the question “What use is the truth to us now?” (p. 208) apply?

17. The physicality of the body is very much in evidence throughout the narrative. Indeed, a corpse sets the novel in motion, and an act of physical abuse lies at its center. Find examples of the weight of the body throughout the text: consider the death of Ada’s husband, Charlie, of Veronica seeing “the living with all their smells and holes” through Liam’s eyes (p. 76), her statement “I do not believe in my husband’s body anymore” (p. 73). Discuss the place of sex in the novel as another aspect of the physical. Is there a division of body and soul in the novel?

18. Male sexuality in particular is a contentious topic in this book. In some instances, as with Ada and Charlie, it is part of a romantic, nurturing union between two people; in others, it is a thing inflicted on one person by another. Both types of sexuality—the constructive and the destructive—have a lasting effect on future generations. Consider the female views of male sexuality presented in this book, and the ways in which men like Tom are forced to reckon with their “impulses and [their] actions, and the gap between the two” (p. 177). How are these male characters affected when they let their desires govern their behavior?

19. Religion runs seamlessly through the fabric of the narrative as a presence in the lives of the Hegarty children but not as an overwhelming influence. Find instances where religion appears in the narrative and discuss its importance to the characters, and to the novel as a whole. Talk about how *The Gathering*'s lack of emphasis on religion might fit into the tradition of Irish literature.

20. What do you think Veronica means when she says “Blasphemy seems to be my business here” (p. 59).

21. Consider the role of happiness in the novel. Do you think that any of the characters have found contentment in their life? Why do you think Veronica

considered Ada and Charlie to be happy? Given her memories of what happened at their house during her childhood, what does this say about her view of happiness? Discuss the following statement “with the Hegartys a declaration of unhappiness is always a declaration of blame” (p. 210), and talk about what it means with regard to the Hegartys’ notion of happiness and unfairness in life.

22. In many ways Veronica has tried to escape the clutches of her childhood. Pinpoint ways in which she has attempted this, and consider how successful she has been. When she goes on her night drives to old childhood haunts were you surprised to find her still living so geographically close to her past? Do you think she can ever really escape?

23. Veronica states that she feels “pawed, used, loved, and very lonely” (p. 244). What have you learned about her over the course of the narrative that would explain why she feels this way? What does she mean when she wishes that someone will “say, again, that everything will be all right?” (p. 244).

24. Why do you think that everyone, and especially Veronica, is entranced by the child Rowan? What does he seem to represent?

25. At the end of the novel Veronica finds herself falling back into her life, hoping to return to her husband and daughters, and to reenter her own life.

What do you think the future holds for her? Do you think she will be able to live in her life again as she wishes? Has she grown during the narrative, and, if so, how? Did you find her empathetic as a character? As a narrator? What do you hope for her future? (*Questions from the publisher.*)

Multimedia

NPR Interview: "Anne Enright Offers a Bleak Tale in 'The Gathering'"

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87941683>

Readalike

The Singing Bird by Roisin McAuley (2004)

Pearl by Mary Gordon (2004)

In the Beginning by Catherine Dunne (1997)

We are all fine here by Mary Guterson (2005)

Lily of the Valley by Suzanne Shea (1999)