
Reading Guide

Sisters of Belfast

Harper Paperbacks

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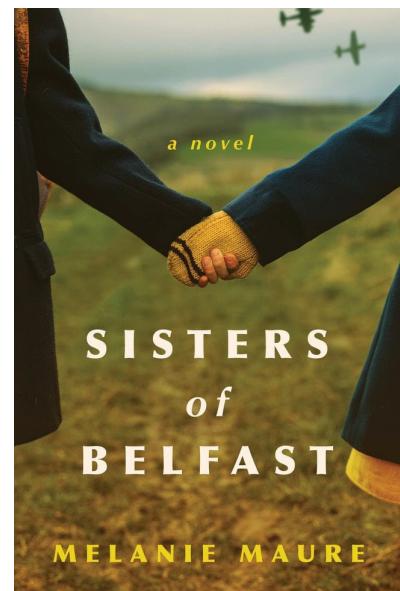
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Introduction

Orphaned during the Second World War, Aelish and Isabel McGuire—known as the twins of Belfast—are given over to the austere care of the Sisters of Bethlehem. Though they are each all the other has, the girls are propelled in opposite directions as they grow up. Rebellious Isabel turns her back on the church and Ireland, traveling to Newfoundland where she pursues a perilous yet independent life. Devout Aelish chooses to remain in Northern Ireland and takes the veil, burying painful truths beneath years of silence. For decades the two are separated, each unaware of the other's life. But after years of isolation Aelish is unexpectedly summoned to Newfoundland, where she and her estranged sister begin to bridge the chasm between them.

Reunion brings to light the painful secrets and seismic deceptions that have kept these sisters apart, leaving the McGuire twins to begin reconstructing their understanding about themselves as women and as family—what they know of love, hope, and above all, forgiveness.

A story of faith—in religion, in the world, and in one another—*Sisters of Belfast* is a heartbreakingly tragic, and deeply moving novel about survival and the enduring power of sisterhood.



Questions for Discussion

1. *Sisters of Belfast* offers a complex mix of love stories from various female characters. Which character's story or inner life are you most able to relate to, and why? While we are often repelled by certain people in our lives and in works of fiction, there is the possibility that these people and characters have something to teach us about ourselves. Is this true of any characters you encountered in this novel, and how so?
2. At the core of this work of fiction is the very real, present, and divisive topic of women's reproductive rights. Discuss the novel's portrayal of this issue and your thoughts and feelings about the progress, or lack thereof, today.
3. Discuss the relationship between Aelish and Izzy. Are there any moments in their story that particularly resonate with you? Do you side with one sister over the other and if so, why?
4. The best novels are often the ones that leave us feeling deeply and haunted by a character or topic, whether it be anger, love, frustration, sorrow, or endearment. Did you experience any of these while reading, and if so, who or what evoked the reaction from you, and why?

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5. Within *Sisters of Belfast* there are several subplots of unrequited love. One of which is the unrequited love between Sister Mike and Charlie Rose. What thoughts, feelings, or judgments do you have about this storyline? Have you ever experienced unrequited love?
 6. *Sisters of Belfast* has a few antagonists. Some blatant, such as Sister Edel and Declan's parents, while others are more obscure, yet just as powerful, like the religious community. Discuss how these important antagonistic elements deepen the story. What thought or perspectives do their actions or way of moving through the world provoke in you? Are there any points at which you found yourself with compassion for them?
 7. Discuss the hidden affection Aelish carries for Declan. Is she wise in keeping this love to herself and prioritizing Isabel's love and happiness? Is Isabel selfish in taking Declan for herself, knowing that her twin has feelings for him? Do you believe that our fates can be altered by another?
 8. *Sisters of Belfast* holds many flawed, yet endearing characters stitched together from factual accounts and journalistic narratives of those who experienced the mother and baby homes in Ireland. Not the least of which is sweet Leena. Knowing that her story is based on some very harsh truths, what impact does Leena's story have on you? Discuss your awareness, or lack thereof, around this tragic piece of history and how it might be reflected in the historical mosaic of your home country.
 9. Discuss any moments of surprise or unexpectedness in *Sisters of Belfast*. What emotions are evoked by these moments in the story? Do they change your initial perspective about certain characters and their life choices?