Book Club Set

Small Things Like These

By Claire Keegan

About the Author

Booker Prize in 2022. She is a novelist and short story writer, whose work has won numerous awards and been translated into 30 languages.

Keegan was brought up on a farm in Ireland. At the age of 17, she travelled to New Orleans, where she studied English and Political Science at Loyola University. She returned to Ireland in 1992, and her highly acclaimed first volume of short stories - Antarctica - was published in 1999.

Her stories are translated into 30 languages and have won numerous accolades. Antarctica won the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature. Walk the Blue Fields won the EdgeHill Prize, awarded to the finest collection of stories published in the British Isles. Foster won the Davy Byrnes Award and was last year chosen by The Times as one of the top 50 works of fiction to be published in the 21st century. Small Things Like These was shortlisted for the 2022 Rathbones Folio Prize. It won the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year Award and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2022.

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About the Book

It is 1985, in an Irish town. During the weeks leading up to Christmas, Bill Furlong, a coal and timber merchant, faces his busiest season. As he does the rounds, he feels the past rising up to meet him - and encounters the complicit silences of a small community controlled by the Church. Claire Keegan's tender tale of hope and quiet heroism is both a celebration of compassion and a stern rebuke of the sins committed in the name of religion.

The book is not so much about the nature of evil as the circumstances that allow it. More than Furlong's quiet heroism, it explores the silent, self-interested complicity of a whole community, which makes it possible for such cruelty to persist. It forces every reader to ask what they are doing about the injustices that we choose not to think about too closely. Astonishingly, Keegan achieves this without ever sounding angry or preachy.

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Discussion Questions

1. When his mother's trouble became known, and her people made it clear that they'd have no more to do with her... (p. 5) Furlong was born to an unmarried mother who died at 16. Due to the generosity of his employer, he was one of few babies born to a person outside of wedlock who got to stay with his mother. Discuss Furlong's experience and the long-term impact this had on his character.
2. The Taoiseach had signed an agreement with Thatcher over The North, and the Unionists in Belfast were out marching with drums, protesting over Dublin having any say in their affairs. (p.13) What was the political atmosphere of the time in Ireland? How did this impact communities such as the one which Bill Furlong lives in?
3. Lately, he had begun to wonder what mattered, apart from Eileen and the girls. He was touching forty but didn't feel himself to be getting anywhere or making any kind of headway and could not but sometimes wonder what the days were for. (p. 33) Weariness, worry and repetition are imbued in the story and Furlong's character seems like a man on the brink. What are the factors that have led to this?
4. When Furlong first visits the local laundry to deliver some logs, a girl with roughly cut hair begs him to help and take her 'as far as the river'. Furlong replies by showing his open, empty hands. What does Furlong mean by this gesture? (p. 41)
5. Inside the laundry, one of the nuns suggests Furlong must be disappointed as he has five girls and 'no boy to carry on the name'. Furlong replies by saying: 'What do I have against girls?' […] 'My own mother was a girl, once. And I dare say the same must be true of you and half of all belonging to us.' Why is the feminist attitude expressed by Furlong unique for the time and community he lives in? (p. 66 - 67)
6. After he visits the laundry, a woman who runs the cafe warns Furlong about what he has seen there: 'Tis no affair of mine, you understand, but you know you'd

want to watch over what you'd say about what's there?'. (p. 94) To what extent did the wider community seem to have knowledge of the real goings-on in the laundries? Do you think the villagers were complicit in the crimes?

7. The book ends at a point where many other authors would begin their novels' second act. To what extent is Keegan deliberately asking the reader to create the rest of the story for themselves? What do you think happens to Bill Furlong next?
8. Small Things Like These has been described as historical fiction, yet the author disagrees with it being a novel about the Magdalene laundries (Guardian interview, October 21), saying, 'I think it's a story about a man who was loved in his youth and can't resist offering the same type of love to somebody else'. Discuss how Claire Keegan has allowed historical fiction and a deeper character study to intersect.
9. Not one person they met addressed Sarah or asked where he was taking her. Feeling little or no obligation to say very much or to explain, Furlong smoothed things over as best he could and carried on along with the excitement in his heart matched by the fear of what he could not yet see but knew he would encounter. (p. 107) In this scene towards the end of the novel, in which Furlong escorts one of the girls from the laundry outside and through the streets to his home, what personal battle is he also facing?

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https://thebookerprizes.com/sites/default/files/2022-09/220927%20Reading%20Guide%20Small%20Things%20Like%20These.pdf

Author Interview

How does it feel to be longlisted for the Booker Prize 2022 and what would winning the Booker mean to you?

It's both a privilege and an honour to see this novel nominated for the Booker Prize, to know that the judges consider it worthy. I've no idea what winning would mean, don't know that anyone could know what winning would mean unless or until it happened - and even then, its meaning might be difficult to articulate. More readers is the most obvious answer - readers who might not otherwise find your work finding your work.

There was an 11-year gap between your last book, Foster, and Small Things Like These. How long did it take to write Small Things, and what does your writing process look like? Do you type or write in longhand? Are there multiple drafts, sudden bursts of activity, long pauses? Is there a significant amount of research and plotting before you begin writing?

I don't like to think about how long it took to write this book. The story was rumbling in the back of my mind for a long time, some years, before I ever began and then I went through a period of taking notes and trying not to write it. I'm always reluctant to go in - and my early drafts are the most difficult to compose and face. At the beginning, little or nothing works on a level of suggestion. It seems to me that all good stories are told with varying degrees of reluctance - and in my case the author, too, is reluctant to go in. But not writing is almost always more difficult than writing.

There must be 50 or so drafts. I've kept them all and they filled two large boxes. I take notes in longhand then make the incision in time and choose a point of view, and begin freshly, on the screen. Long pauses don't work for me. There is no magic drawer in my house that makes the work look better after it is put away for months, but I understand that other writers do find this useful.

I don't ever plot. And I do very little research, as little as possible. I prefer to use my imagination. Language is older and richer than we are and when you go in there and let go and listen, it's possible to discover something way beyond and richer than your conscious self. It seems to me that when we fail, it's because our imagination fails us. I believe this to be true of both life and literature.

Where do you write? What does your working space look like?

I write at home. This book was written in my sitting room overlooking the Wexford coast, and was completed during lockdown. I wrote for several hours every night and morning during those 18 months, as my fellowship at Trinity College was cut short when the pandemic began and I didn't have the usual commitments to my students.

If it was at all cold, I kept the fire going. It's nice to have a fire in the room you're working in. Long, dark mornings can also be a great help. And a young ginger cat came straight up to me out of the bushes and moved in and slept on an old sheepskin on my desk, as though that's where he wanted me to be. In the finish, for that final year and more, I was probably averaging eight hours a day at the desk, something I'd never done.

Small Things Like These is the shortest book to have been longlisted for the Booker in its entire history. Did you know from the outset that it was going to be a short book? Are your earlier drafts much longer?

It isn't possible at the outset to know what length a book will be. I've never set out to write something short except when there was a set word limit for a short story competition or a commissioned piece. But I've always been interested in choosing well and putting what's chosen to good use, reusing those choices made. I'm more interested in going in than going on.

There's a wonderful letter Chekhov wrote to his brother Alexander about the meaning of grace, how grace is when you make the least number of movements between two

points - and that type of athletic prose has always appealed to me, coupled with light-handedness and restraint. Elegance, to me, is writing just enough. And, as James Baldwin said, in his Paris Review interview, ‘the hardest thing in the world is simplicity’.

I’m interested in transitions, paragraph structure, in what happens between paragraphs, those leaps in time. And Furlong, my central character, isn’t someone who says much. He’s the most unwilling narrator, so I was obliged to stay within his mindset, his reluctances. A longer novel would not have suited his personality and it’s all told from his point of view, so it was my task to oblige him in this way, to be well-mannered towards and abide by his reserve.

Where did the idea for the book come from? What was your starting point? Was it a character or situation, or broader events in Ireland or elsewhere?

It started out as a short story told from the point of view of a boy who accompanies his father to deliver a load of coal and finds another boy, much his own age, locked up in the coal shed at a boarding school. His father just locked the door then went on to make the next delivery, saying nothing.

At some point, the coalman’s point of view took over and I became preoccupied with him and it felt necessary to explore how he, the father, would carry this knowledge around with him on his rounds, through his days, through his life and how or if he could or would still regard himself as a good father. I’m not even sure if this man, Furlong, can regard himself as a good father after this novel ends - as he may have deprived his daughters of a decent education and may lose his business, may not be able to provide for his family.

I’m interested in how we cope, how we carry what’s locked up in our hearts. I wasn’t deliberately setting out to write about misogyny or Catholic Ireland or economic hardship or fatherhood or anything universal, but I did want to answer back to the question of why so many people said and did little or nothing knowing that girls and

women were incarcerated and forced to labour in these institutions. It caused so much pain and heartbreak for so many. Surely this wasn't necessary or natural?

When this book won the Kerry Prize for best Irish novel, one of the judges said the book left her with the question: so what are you going to do now with what you believe in? This response alone made the book worth writing.

Although the book features one of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries, you have said elsewhere that it is not about the Laundries. What would you say the book is about? Love, kindness, duty - something else?

It's the story of a coalman named Bill Furlong who lives with his wife and five daughters in a small town, set in the weeks coming up to Christmas…

I can't now help thinking of Flannery O' Connor, who said that a story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is!

I know some readers see it as a story of a simply heroic character. I'm not saying that my character isn't heroic - but I see Furlong as a self-destructive man and that this is the account of his breaking down. He's coming into middle age, suffering an identity crisis, doesn't know who his father is, and he's also coming to terms with the fact that he was bullied at school. And his workaholism, which until now has kept the past at bay, is wearing thin. It's also a portrait of how difficult it was to practice being a good Christian in Catholic Ireland.

But I also like to think it's a book about love. Furlong was loved as a child, and was wanted at a time when so many children born within and outside of wedlock were unwanted. It was the English poet, Philip Larkin, who wrote that beautiful line 'what will survive us is love' - and I like to think that this book has something to answer back about this, and for better or worse perhaps prove it true. Without being loved as a child,

Furlong might have been brutalized, grown hard as others did and self-centered - and might also have done nothing.

Like another Irish book on the 2022 longlist, Audrey Magee's The Colony, an uncomfortable period in Ireland's history casts a shadow over the main narrative. Is Ireland's past unavoidable for Irish writers?

I don't believe Ireland's past is any more or less unavoidable or avoidable than any other country's past is for writers of other nationalities.

The book is set in 1985 yet in many ways feels timeless. What was the significance of setting it in the mid-Eighties?

Well, it could not have been set after the Ferns Report was published, as the Catholic Church had by that time lost much of its power and was collapsing. I didn't want to set it in a time before motor vehicles because that would suggest it was something of the distant past, not a society of my own generation's making. If it was set in another time, it might not have allowed me to question and criticize the society we ourselves created, our current misogynies and fear, the cowardices and silences and perversities and survival tactics of my own generation.

Which book or books are you reading at the moment?

I'm reading the Norton Anthology of Short Stories, edited by Richard Bausch. as I'll be running a course on the short story in February and want to prepare and teach new stories. I've just read The Management of Grief by Bharati Mukherjee and the essay Richard Ford wrote on the story, both of which will be included on the syllabus. They're wonderful.

Do you have a favourite Booker-winning or Booker-shortlisted novel and, if so, why?

The Remains of the Day is the first that comes to mind. I've this belief that good writing is good manners - and Ishiguro's novel is such a beautiful example of elegance and tact. Quiet, restrained prose is what attracts me. I'm more interested in tension than in drama.

It's impossible to not also think of McGahern's Amongst Women, a well-loved novel here in Ireland, which was shortlisted. And Roddy Doyle's The Van. I was sitting in a hospital waiting room when reading the end of that novel. The ending fell so beautifully into place and I felt he stopped when he could have gone on, and didn't. Again, I suppose it's the restraint that I admire, or one of the many things I admire, in his prose.

Last year's winner, The Promise, by Damon Galgut, is such a fine novel - but for a long time I've admired Galgut's work, which I have taught. I was so pleased that his novel won last year.

What's the one book you wish you'd have written?

There isn't any book I wish I'd written for the simple reason that it wouldn't be mine. It would feel like theft. Or it could mean I'd have to be dead. I don't covet anyone else's work, I need to write my own, I need to earn my prose. If I were pressed, I'd probably choose The Great Gatsby.

What are you working on next?

I'm settling down to work on a book set on the farm where I grew up in Wicklow. It is a mother's story. The parts have not yet cohered in my mind as I'm still at the note-taking stage - but September is round the corner, and it's time to settle down to the desk for the autumn and light the fire and see which way the wind blows. It may, of course, turn out to be something else entirely.

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As a group we rated this book:

1 2 3 4 5

Ugh! It was OK... Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: