

GOOD

EGGS *a novel*

READING GROUP GUIDE

REBECCA
HARDIMAN



This reading group guide for **GOOD EGGS** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Rebecca Hardiman.

The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

A hilarious and heartfelt debut novel following three generations of a boisterous family whose simmering tensions boil over when a home aide enters the picture, becoming the calamitous force that will either undo or remake them—perfect for fans of *Where'd You Go, Bernadette* and *Evvie Drake Starts Over*.

When Kevin Gogarty's irrepressible eighty-three-year-old mother, Millie, is caught shoplifting yet again, he has no choice but to hire a caretaker to keep an eye on her. Kevin, recently unemployed, is already at his wits' end tending to a full house while his wife travels to exotic locales for work, leaving him solo with his rebellious teenage daughter, Aideen, whose troubles escalate when she befriends the campus rebel at her new boarding school.

Into the Gogarty fray steps Sylvia, Millie's upbeat home aide, who appears at first to be their saving grace—until she catapults the Gogarty clan into their greatest crisis yet.

With charm, humor, and pathos to spare, *Good Eggs* is a delightful study in self-determination; the notion that it's never too late to start living; and the unique redemption that family, despite its maddening flaws, can offer.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Despite their large age gap, Millie and Aideen have quite a lot in common. How are their circumstances and personalities similar? What makes them understand each other so well?
2. Although they all have various frustrations with one another, the Gogarty clan clearly love each other. What are some ways they demonstrate their affection, albeit in perhaps untraditional ways?
3. Each of the three narrators makes at least one big mistake over the course of the novel. Did you empathize with their decisions at all? How does author Rebecca Hardiman make Millie, Kevin, and Aideen sympathetic despite their mistakes?
4. Why do you think Aideen wants to be friends with the notorious Brigid? What draws them together?
5. Did you see the twist with Sylvia coming? What were some signs indicating Sylvia wasn't exactly who she said she was? Why do you think Millie was so willing to place her trust in her caretaker?
6. Were you surprised that Aideen goes back to Millburn? Do you think her parents were right in sending her to boarding school in the first place?
7. One theme throughout the novel is wanting the freedom to choose your own path in life. Despite their best efforts, Millie, Kevin, and Aideen often run into problems with being able to make their own choices. How does each character react to a lack of freedom?
8. There are many funny scenes in the novel, in addition to its humorous tone. Which moments made you laugh, and how did they make you feel about the characters?
9. In Chapter 15, Millie thinks to herself, "Millie Gogarty is a survivor, a citizen of the Republic of Ireland whose mother clutched her brown rations books doled out in wartime with the triumphant sense of rising to the occasion; she is a great believer in making do." Much of *Good Eggs* is about Millie learning to do more than "make do" and embrace life fully. Do any other characters need to learn this lesson too? If so, in what ways do they learn it?
10. We learn that Millie's baby daughter died in infancy. Do you think this explains any of Millie's character traits?
11. What do you think life will be like for the Gogarty family in one year? What will have changed, and what will be the same?
12. In what ways does the author evoke the Irish setting? How does it contrast with the scenes in Florida?
13. Do you think all the main characters in the novel are proverbial "good eggs?"



ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. With its big cast of characters, charming Irish setting, and often hilarious plot twists, *Good Eggs* seems perfect for a film or TV adaptation. Who would you cast as its main characters? What scene would you most look forward to watching?
2. Aideen's poems are strewn throughout the novel. Have your book club members draw names and compose a poem about that person in the style of Aideen.
3. For your next book club, read another novel set in Ireland, such as *Himself* by Jess Kidd or *Holding* by Graham Norton. Discuss how setting is evoked in each novel and what you learned about Ireland from Rebecca Hardiman and the other author you select.



A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA HARDIMAN

Q: *Good Eggs* is both heartfelt and laugh-out-loud hilarious. Did you set out to write a funny novel, or did the characters you created inform its tone?

A: Thank you—I'm glad you laughed because, yes, I want you to laugh. It's totally thrilling and humbling to connect with readers that way. The novel began with the quirky characters and the story unfolded as I imagined them in their lives. I love funny people and characters who bicker cleverly. Personally, I'm a huge fan of sad stories and serious books and sweeping epics, but my all-time favorite is writing that makes me laugh. Andrew Sean Greer's *Less*, for instance, or David Sedaris, Fredrik Backman, Sue Townsend. I grew up reading and rereading the *Adrian Mole* books and they are still brilliantly funny.

Q: Did you write any hijinks for Millie and Aideen that ultimately got cut? What other mischief could they have potentially gotten into?

A: At one point, there was a gun involved, but I think I dismissed it as too outlandish, even for them. I had to rein in some of my wackier ideas because I didn't want to go to *Keystone Cops*; I wanted to ground the fun in some reality. But now that I think of it, maybe they should have tied Sylvia up in a lifeguard tower on Clearwater Beach and held her for ransom, though who would have paid it? Or rented an eighteen-wheeler and gone on a cross-country road trip and picked up a few truckers along the way? Millie might have accidentally dropped her car keys in the Hoover Dam or chatted her way into the office of an unsuspecting Hollywood agent and pitched her life story.

Q: Family, of course, can drive us crazy like nobody else can. What in particular annoys Kevin, Aideen, and Millie about one another?

A: The characters love each other, they are always talking and interacting, they are all very engaged with each other, and at the same time they're stuck with each other. I mean, what's better than family, and at the same time, can any one group drive you more to the brink of lunacy? You are inexorably connected, and some days you want to run screaming and other days you put your arms around your people and you're profoundly grateful. No one knows me or my vast limitations like my family; no one can push my buttons with such exquisite precision. I wanted to write a story about how it feels to be in a real family, but a funny one.

Millie is specifically frustrating to her people because she's inherently rebellious and refuses to play by the rules. I mean, she's a lot to take. She also refuses to confront certain realities as well as the fact that her actions impact her family, especially Kevin. Kevin, meanwhile, annoys Millie because she sees him as trying to control her life, which he has to do; she's getting on and she needs help.

With Aideen, being a generation removed, the little vexations aren't so intense. She gets annoyed with her grandmother but mostly because Millie can be embarrassing and, in her adolescent mind, that reflects on her self-definition. Which is her primary struggle, you know: who am I, what kind of person am I going to be?

A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA HARDIMAN (CONT.)

Q: From Millie to Kevin to Aideen, there's a wide range of ages and experiences in the novel. Did you find it challenging to write characters of multiple generations?

A: I liked the idea of three people at three very different stages in their lives. With Millie, I tried to imagine what it would feel like to have most of your life behind you: your spouse is gone, many of your pals are gone; how lonely and isolating that might feel. Everyone's life is moving forward and you're being left behind; you're running out of time. I wanted to upend that. I liked having her fighting death every day by not giving up, even if it's ultimately a futile fight.

With Kevin, who is roughly my age, I channeled my own domestic frustrations. It was cathartic to vent through his character because middle age can be a time of stuck-ness. If you're lucky, you're around the halfway point in your life. The choices you've made a decade or two ago—marriage, house, children, career—are fully manifest in your day-to-day. The idealism and dreamy lala-ness of your twenties are well behind you. You may be scratching your head going, "Wait, what happened to that dream?" Or, "I haven't accomplished this" or "I failed that" and "What exactly is the point of all of this?" I found myself working through these questions as I wrote Kevin. Anyone who knows what it's like to be a full-time stay-at-home parent whose spouse has a very demanding job knows you can feel frustrated, especially when your kids are young. You might start to resent the mornings your spouse goes into work and gets to read on the subway and speak to other adults all day long while you're wiping smears of banana from the sofa.

For Aideen who's straddling childhood and adulthood, I tried to remember myself at that age, how tumultuous life can feel. You want freedom and you desperately want to be an adult, but you lack confidence and wisdom and experience. You may care way too much about what others think. And you adamantly don't want to be defined by your family, although of course it defines and shapes you more than anything. I remember when I was young, I'd write "I hate mom" in my journal and, on more than one occasion, underline the words violently. But of course I didn't hate her—I loved her; I sought her approval. But I hated that she could stand in my way, that she had so much say in my life. So writing Aideen, I tried to recall all of that, and it also helped that I have teenagers of my own, so I had living, breathing samples of the species in its natural habitat to learn from.

Q: It's a delight to see Millie and Aideen in Florida and out of their familiar surroundings. What did you want to show the reader about their characters via their trip? Why was it important to the novel—and to you—that they go to America and track down Sylvia?

A: I wanted to send them on an adventure because I thought it would be fun—fun to read and fun to write. If Millie and Aideen were put in a situation in which they had a shared goal and nothing left to lose, they might begin to change. Ripping them out of their country and their daily troubles would force them to become sharper, use their smarts, tap their potential, become more resilient, and also get to know each other and grow to love each other. Millie must track down Sylvia because she must seize her life, take control of her own fate, fight back, not give up. And of course they had to pull their own little con on Sylvia to restore justice.

Florida struck me as the perfect anti-Ireland—sunny, massive, alien, sprawling—opening up all sorts of possibilities. I hoped it would be a rich culture clash rife with humor, especially for a character as opinionated as Millie.

A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA HARDIMAN (CONT.)

Q: There are so many novels about mothers and daughters, but mothers and sons, and also fathers and daughters, are less common. What dynamics in these relationships were you interested in exploring?

A: At one point, I'd flirted with the idea of three generations of women—grandmother, mother, daughter—but that's a lot of strong, stubborn females, which is its own dynamic! I liked the idea of a hefty dose of male energy in the book, and I was interested in exploring the dynamic of responsibility in family—what you owe, what your duty is, how heavy and conflicted it can feel and, ultimately, how little we control.

Also, I liked the idea of switching up the classic stay-at-home mom scenario. At one point in my own life when our kids were very young, my husband, burnt out on his job, became the house-husband and I was the full-time worker. This went on for well over a year, a stretch of time which, much to my great fortune, spanned potty training. My husband was a really good stay-at-home father—way more chill than myself and a much better cook—and if the world of writing were more lucrative, we might still be in this setup. Some mornings, he and the boys would walk me down to the train station and stand on the platform to wave me off. It was fabulous. When I got home, I'd grill him about what it was like to be the one guy among six moms at play group (he loved it, needless to say).

Q: What are some of your favorite novels set in Ireland? Did they influence your writing at all?

A: I like to think that every book you read influences you and you hope, as a writer, that through osmosis you'll learn something about the craft as you're reading. I'll often hear a lot of buzz about a novel and I'll set out to read it with a very serious agenda of studying how the author is structuring her plot or building character, how the sausage is getting made. But almost invariably, I find somewhere over the course of the story that I've totally forgotten to pay attention to all that boring stuff and I'm just on a wild ride with the characters; I'm just enjoying it.

That said, yes, tons of specifically Irish writing has been inspirational. I mean, that country has famously produced so many amazing writers from the very beginning—poets and novelists and playwrights and screenwriters. The Irish truly are gifted storytellers, not just with the written word, but also in everyday life, in the pub or in the street or coffee shop or around someone's kitchen table, chatting away into the wee hours. I love the wicked sense of humor, the clever wordplay, the funny roasts. The first year I lived in Dublin, there was a bronze statue installed in town of a James Joyce character, Anna Livia, a woman with long hair lying seductively in a water fountain. Almost immediately, probably seconds after the unveiling, she was being dubbed "The Whore in the Sewer" and "The Floozie in the Jacuzzi." That's so Irish; it's just ingrained in the national psyche.

Some of my favorite modern Irish writers: pretty much every book Roddy Doyle has ever written, Sally Rooney, Colum McCann, Jess Kidd's *Himself*, Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls*, Kevin Barry, Martin McDonagh's plays are brilliantly creepy and chilling, William Trevor, Brian Friel, Maeve Binchy, Emma Donoghue. To write a book from the perspective of a little boy who's been kidnapped and lives his whole life in one room? That's crazy.

A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA HARDIMAN (CONT.)

Q: Do you have a next novel in mind? Can you tell us anything about it?

A: I've got a couple of murky, cockeyed notions percolating. One of the seeds of *Good Eggs* was sewn when I was in college. I read a story in the paper about these two old ladies who break out of a nursing home with an elaborate plan to go to... Burger King. It was sort of tragic and darkly humorous. That stayed with me and a version of it ended up in the book. I'm always on the lookout for wacky characters, especially rebellious outsiders, and I have a fondness, in fiction and life, for people prone to stress. As someone who's constantly succumbing to it, I do find stress very funny. And I'm particularly drawn to the absurd and hilarious in dark situations. There was recently a news item in England in which these thugs kidnapped a twelve-year-old boy and frog-marched him to a waiting van. They took him to a house to make him apologize. Why? Because he'd smashed their Halloween pumpkins. I mean, that's insane! But it gets you thinking: How terrified did that kid feel being hustled into someone's van on his innocent walk home from school? And what kind of a person would get that worked up about vandalized squash?

Q: Most importantly, what does being a "good egg" mean to you? When did you decide it should be the title of this novel?

A: Growing up, the term "good egg" was constantly bandied about by my mother in our house. These characters, like all of us, are imperfect and flawed. They can be selfish and wrong and make bad choices, they sometimes hurt each other, as family can, or miscommunicate, but they love and care about each other. As the story progresses, they begin to see things from one another's perspective and empathize, and they ultimately all forgive each other. They mean well and they're decent and caring, all noble in my mind, and that makes them good eggs.



MEET THE GOGARTYS



MILLIE

Grandmother, occasional shoplifter



AIDEEN

Reluctant teenager, deliberate rebel



KEVIN

Long-suffering stepson and father

...THEY'RE CRACKING GOOD FUN.

Grandma Millie's Impromptu Travel Itinerary



1. Have a whiskey and a bath to soothe one's nerves.
2. Leave your house in Dún Laoghaire with your granddaughter, Aideen.
3. Take the M-50 very quickly whilst Aideen ignores texts in all caps from family.
4. Arrive at the Dublin Airport for your unauthorized international jaunt.
5. Consider getting Irish smoked salmon at the duty-free shopping area for the trip. You just can't get the same thing in America.
6. Board the plane and study the emergency landing card.
7. Mid-trip, go to the bathroom and light a cigarette.
8. Quickly thereafter, get yelled at by the flight attendant for smoking on an airplane.
9. Have your granddaughter save the day by pretending that you have dementia. She's mad at you for the rest of the plane ride but it was a showstopping performance on her part.
10. Arrive at Orlando International, Florida, and go through customs. When the customs agent asks if you're there for business or pleasure, reply "Pleasure, with a soupçon of business."
11. Use the Florida Express Bus Service (which offers a great senior citizen discount, by the way) to travel by bus to Clearwater, Florida. Get stuck next to an excessively verbose seatmate, a great-grandmother named Geraldine, who you now know entirely too much about.
12. Get a taxi to the Castaways Motel and book a room for the night.
13. The next day, continue on to 2895 Victory Towers, Unit 208, Clearwater, Florida, in search of one Sylvia Phenning.

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