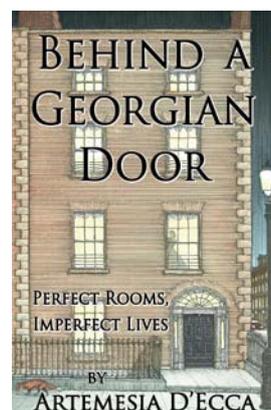


BOOK CLUB SUMMARIES AND QUESTIONS

Behind a Georgian Door by Artemesia D'Ecce



Three contemporary stories linked by their setting in three of Dublin's landmark Georgian terraces.

The background to the stories is the financial boom that began in the 1990s and transformed Ireland (for the worse, some think), and the great financial crash of 2008 that ended it. These stories are all set in the wake of that boom and crash.

SUMMARIES:

CHRISTMAS 2013



Catherine and Martin bought their house in **Herbert Place** during the boom. Both were big earners and big spenders and they lavished money on the house's restoration, particularly on an extravagant, two-storey, galleried library.

"When we were building it, I never stopped thinking of it as a Christmas room," Catherine says, "– a pagan forest of ivy swags, holly branches, and dangling mistletoe surrounding a monster tree somewhere in the middle..."

Everything changed with the disastrous crash of 2008. Both found themselves out of work, their house was devalued to a fraction of what they had spent on it, they are deeply in debt, and Ireland's harsh laws about debt and bankruptcy give them limited options. Their new poverty has brought to the surface differences between them.

Catherine says to a neighbour, "It's strange how money can conceal so many fault lines."

They have a young child, and as another grey Christmas approaches Catherine finds the approach of the holiday affecting her in a way she never expected.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S BED

Mrs Moynihan, a wealthy widow, now lives in Zürich. She never understood, or liked, her only son, Roderick, who lives in Dublin, and she loathes his money-loving wife, Clara. She is close, however, to her twin brother, Paul, a dealer in antique books, who also lives in Dublin, in the Georgian house in **Upper Pembroke Street** she has bought for him. She rarely visits Ireland, disliking the manner in which society there changed during the boom.

After learning that Paul is sick, she returns hurriedly to Dublin, accompanied by Mikey, an ex-political-prisoner whom she and her late husband met by chance on their final holiday in Ireland, and to whom they became close.

A taxi driver, Eamon, has brought Paul to a hospital, but Paul insists on returning to Upper Pembroke Street – to the hall-floor library that he loves. Paul knows he is to die shortly. When he breaks the news to his sister, Mrs Moynihan looked around the comfortable room, with a feeling more of anger than of sadness. "It's a wasteful business, mortality," she said. "Life dupes us into going to so much trouble about things – this house, for instance, you have it so perfect."

Roderick visits unexpectedly. His mother is horrified at first, but as Paul lies dying and the ill-assorted group of Eamon (who has been asked to stay to help), Mikey, and her son keep vigil with her through the night, events do not follow an expected course.



GRACE KELLY'S DRESS

Maud, an artist and a recluse, lives in **Merrion Square**. She shares the house with an American, an Australian, and a couple from the Philippines, all of whom had moved in as a short-term arrangement,

but stayed because it worked out so well. Maud had been married ten years earlier, but widowed almost immediately when her husband died in a car crash as they were returning from their honeymoon. Maud, too, was injured in the crash, and more significantly it brought on a difficult illness, which left her bedridden for a long time, and also alienated from the world. She hasn't left the house since then.



It is Maud's fortieth birthday, and her housemates have planned (at the instigation of her mother) a spectacular dinner party. It becomes clear that her mother hopes the party will be a start to bringing Maud back to a normal life, and no effort has been spared in the preparations for it. Her mother had hoped that some old friends of her daughter might be invited, but she and Maud's housemates come to the conclusion that the reclusive Maud would not tolerate any outsiders, and decide that the only guests will be Maud's mother and stepfather, and the residents of the house.

For a birthday present, her housemates have bought Maud a vintage dress from the 1950s to wear at the party – an exact copy of a famous dress Grace Kelly wore in *Rear Window* when she arranged for a meal from the "21" Club to be served at James Stewart's apartment. The catering is to be done by the chef and staff of a Michelin-starred restaurant (who owe a favour to one of the residents of the house) and the meal is to be inspired by the traditions of formal 1950s dining.

Illness has affected Maud's appearance, but her alienation from the world is deep, and pressure has to be kept up all day to see her ready for the dinner. In spite of herself, she is impressed by the result.

"By seven, we were all in the first-floor drawing room... We were a smug little group... Like everyone else, I couldn't stop looking in the mirror."

The dinner is lavish, theatrical, and a huge success. The question of whether it will have any long-term effect on Maud, however, is left open.

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you like or dislike any or all of the main characters?
2. If you were in debt, do you think you would react as Catherine does, or would you be more like Martin? Do you have sympathy for either of them or for both of them? Do you think their marriage will survive? Will it be less secure or will it be weaker?
3. How significant to the book are Dublin, its history, and its Georgian houses? Would the stories seem different in character if they were in a different setting?
4. Paul said that the world's molecules seem to be rearranged after a death. What do you think he meant by this, and have you ever had that feeling?
5. Do you think Mrs Moynihan will ever be able to deal comfortably with Clara? What do think the future holds for Mrs Moynihan?
6. Do you think the elaborate dinner party in Merrion Square will have any lasting effect on Maud?
7. What do the three women protagonists have in common and how are they different? Are they similar or different in their attitude to money? How comfortable are Catherine, Mrs Moynihan, and Maud with the values of the society of which they are part?
8. Is there a theme running through the stories about the complexity – and intensity – of the relationships between mothers and their children?
9. Why do you think Mrs Moynihan found it so hard to deal with Roderick as a child? Was her attitude to him understandable or forgivable?
10. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of Catherine, Mrs Moynihan, and Maud?