

Notes To Readers

Spoiler warnings

This kit was created for book clubs to use in their discussions of *American Dirt* and contains spoilers

Content Warning

Please be aware that *The Outside Boy* contains content that may trigger including prejudice and multiculturalism



Interview with the Author

Which book or books are on your nightstand right now?

I was going to fib and say *The Dead Republic* by Roddy Doyle because that's next on my list. But in truth, right now I'm reading a very depressing book called *Famine Echoes* by Cathal Póirtéir as research for my next novel. It's a really harrowing collection of first-person folk-memories of the Irish famine, which makes it horrible pre-sleep reading. So I'm also reading Jennifer Belle's very funny new novel, *The Seven Year Bitch*.

What was your favourite book when you were a child?

I could never choose just one! Top few were probably *Tuck Everlasting*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, all of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.

What book would you most want to read again for the first time?
The Hobbit. It really was astonishing, to read that for the first time.

How did you get started writing?

I wrote my first book when I was about seven years old. It was seventy-five looseleaf pages in a blue, three-ring binder with stickers on the front, and it was about a little girl who skateboards across America. I did all kinds of poetry and story contests, too, when I was a teenager, and I never won anything – I didn't even manage to get published until my college literary magazine.

If you heard someone describing your books (or just the latest book) to a friend out in public, how would you most like to hear them describe them/it?

I would like them to say, "*The Outside Boy* is the greatest book in the history of the universe." But I guess that might be a bit of a stretch. So I think I'd just like them to say that my narrator Christy is funny and loveable, that his story is a compelling one. And maybe also that he opened the reader's mind to an unfamiliar culture.

What's the coolest thing that's happened to you since becoming a published author?

Probably the most gratifying thing has been all the mail I received (and still receive) in response to my memoir, *A Rip in Heaven*. So many people have written to tell me about their stories, their personal traumas. I've heard from sexual assault survivors, homicide survivors, people who have lost children – and in many cases those people found some healing in my book, or a sense of kinship with my family. That always makes me feel like, despite the emotional difficulties of writing and publishing that book, it was a worthwhile endeavor.

What was the first thing you did when you heard that you were going to be published?

I called or wrote to every member of my family to warn them. Publishing my first book wasn't the unreservedly joyous experience for me that it is for many authors – it was really bittersweet. I mean, I was proud of *A Rip in Heaven*, both as a love letter to my lost cousins and as a battle cry for victims' rights. But because that book was about a very personal trauma and my family's ensuing grief, I knew the publication would be difficult for a lot of people in my life, but I really wasn't prepared for how hard it was going to be. I never anticipated the publicity that would surround the book, or that it would become a bestseller. So, while I felt pleased that the book surpassed my hopes in those ways, there was also a lot of emotional fallout surrounding that success.

How was writing fiction different emotionally from writing *A Rip in Heaven* about your cousins' murders?

Oh, writing fiction was so refreshing, after the darkness and terror of that memoir. It was so nice to be writing about made-up characters, people who I could mold and shape, and who would make the choices I wanted them to make. Which isn't to say that these characters don't make some questionable choices, or that I don't grieve for them in their suffering – but it's the kind of grief that I can leave on the page, and it doesn't infect my life. However, I did find that it wasn't as easy to strip my own psychology out of the story as I thought it might be.

Tell us three interesting or offbeat but true things about yourself.

1. I am a HUGE Green Bay Packers football fan. My great uncle was one of the founding members of the team – he worked at the Indian Packing Company in Green Bay, and played football with Curly Lambeau and crew on Sundays before the NFL even existed. My grandpa used to pass the hat on the sidelines to raise money for their team uniforms. I have made pilgrimage to Lambeau Field, and I'm often seen sporting an actual cheesehead on autumn Sundays. I cried when Favre signed with the Vikings. My Irish husband finds this kind of ritual devotion slightly bizarre.
2. When I was nineteen, I participated in an international Irish cultural pageant called The Rose of Tralee, where I won the right to represent the Washington DC Irish Community. I travelled to Ireland where I was interviewed for seventeen minutes on live, Irish national television by Gay Byrne, who's sort of the Johnny Carson of Ireland. Then I sang a song called Kilkelly, about the Irish American diaspora, in front of an audience of something like three million people. My mom showed the very embarrassing video of said performance to anyone who came within 200 yards of my house for many years. I think even our postman has seen it.
3. Although my legal name is Jeanine, my real name has always been Tink. When I went to my first day of kindergarten, and the teacher called roll, afterwards, she asked if anyone hadn't heard her name on the list, so I put my hand up. She asked my name, and I told her "Tink Cummins." She said, "Well, I have a Jeanine Cummins here." And I replied, "Never heard of her." To this day, all of my family and friends still call me Tink – I only use Jeanine in my professional life.

If you couldn't be an author, what profession would you choose and why (and no cheating and falling back on your previous life in publishing)?

I would like to do something involving hardhats and heavy machinery.

What's the hardest thing about writing, besides having to answer goofy interview questions like these?

No question, for me it's the solitude. I'm an extremely sociable person, and my former position as a sales manager at Penguin took full advantage of my outgoing nature. I feel so lucky to be able to write full-time now, but in the beginning, I found the isolation of that position to be a little daunting. Social networking has been a God-send for me, because I can spend the whole day alone, writing, and still feel like I'm interacting with friends and colleagues on Facebook or Twitter.

Are you working on something new now (besides the baby)? If so, give us a teaser for it.

I just started work on a novel half-set in Irish famine times, and half-set in modern day New York, with a young mother who's researching her Irish roots. Summing up a book concept in just a sentence is hard! But I hope it will turn into a story about all kinds of physical and spiritual hunger.

Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. Christy and his grandfather have a very special relationship, so when Grandda dies, it's a particularly difficult loss for Christy. What is it about their bond that makes the two of them so close? In what ways does Grandda, and even the memory of Grandda, enrich Christy's life, and make him feel less alone? Has the absence of Christy's mother made him feel less like a part of his own family?
2. Throughout the book, Christy struggles to find his place in the world, to become comfortable in his own skin. Would you describe Christy as happy, despite his uncertainties? Why or why not?
3. What things does Christy like about being a traveller, and living on the margins of society? Are there ways in which he is ever ashamed of his family or their way of life? Are there moments when he admires or even envies the settled lifestyle? Would Christy be happier if he lived in a house?
4. Are Christy's questions about his identity inevitable, or is there something about the family's extended stay in one place that ignites his struggle to figure out who he is, and where he belongs? How does Christy change during his stay in the town, and his time at school? Who and what are the catalysts for these changes?
5. Christy cherishes books and stories. How do language, stories, and books help Christy to define himself? In contrast, why is his cousin Martin so defensive about his illiteracy?
6. How are Christy and Martin similar, and how are they different? Which of the two boys has a more realistic view of life? Who is the more romantic character? Which of the two do you think is better prepared for the life ahead of him?
7. Is Christy's attitude toward his father typical, for a boy his age? Or is Christy's anger specific to his father's character and the circumstances of their life together? By the end of the book, Christy comes to find out that his father has lied to him about many things. Is this deceit by Dad's fears for Christy's stability, or are the lies indefensible? Is there ever a time when it's acceptable for parents to deceive their children?
8. Does Mrs. Hanley do the right thing in helping Christy to solve the mystery of the photograph, or is her choice a reckless one? She seems to know that she might be opening a can of worms; should she have spoken to Christy's father before agreeing to help?
9. During his stay in the town, Christy becomes very attached to both Sister Hedgehog and Mrs. Hanley, the bookshop owner, after they treat him with basic kindness. Is he looking for a mother figure in these women? Or is he simply grateful for their compassion?
10. Why is Christy unable to find a suitable mother figure among the female characters in his own family? The women in this community tend to have many children. Are Granny and Auntie Brigid simply overextended? Or is Christy looking for something beyond what they have to offer him?
11. Is Christy's budding romance with Funnuala Whippet a viable relationship, or is his friendship with a settled girl doomed by the same obstacles Christy's parents faced? Does this relationship have anything to teach him about his parents and their struggles?
12. Why does Christy react so impatiently with Beano? What is it about Beano that makes Christy so uncomfortable? Despite Beano's awkwardness, he seems to feel entirely comfortable with himself. Could Christy learn anything from Beano about self-acceptance and/or inclusion in society?
13. Christy has an incredibly strong bond with his horse, Jack. Is this a friendship that any young boy might have with his pet, or is there something special in Christy's circumstance or lifestyle that makes the attachment more intense? Who or what does Jack represent to Christy?

Reading Group Discussion Questions

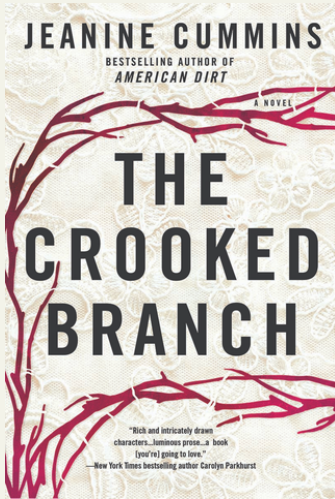
14. What is Christy's predominant emotional response when he finally meets his mother? Does he feel like he has things in common with her? If so, what things? Does he admire her, or feel disappointed by her? Or both? Why?
15. Christy is stunned when his mother reveals that she actually asked his father to kidnap him, when he was still just a baby. Why did she do this? Was it the right decision for Christy? Was it the right decision for Christy's mother, for his father? Was it a selfish act, or a selfless one? Does Christy understand why his mother did what she did?
16. In the end, Christy makes a decision that is a singular act of self-definition. Does Christy's extraordinary action at the end of the book make sense? Is it an act of joy or of grief, or of both? In his heart, Christy believes that his mother will understand the decisions he makes. Do you agree? Why or why not?
17. Christy makes the choice in the end to embrace himself as a traveller, and to return to the only life he's ever known. Is this the right decision for him? As a traveller, Christy comes to value his culture, his family, and his freedom. Do you believe there is intrinsic value in the traveller's nomadic way of life? Why or why not? What aspects of their culture are most valuable? And what features, if any are dispensable?
18. The moral code of travelers is different from the moral code of the largely Catholic, settled community in Ireland. How can two cultures like these, with divergent ethical standards, learn to live together peaceably? Is there ever a time when one's group moral code should trump the other's?
19. Outsiders might be confused by the apparent dichotomies that exist within the moral fabric of the traveling community. For instance, most travellers are strict Catholics who observe their faith with rigor, but within the traveller's code of ethics, there are times when stealing is acceptable. This is a truth that Christy struggles to reconcile throughout the book. In the end, is he successful? What are your thoughts on these ethical disparities? Do similar discrepancies exist in our own moral code? Are these discrepancies harmful or reasonable?
20. Has this story changed your perceptions of gypsies in general, or of Irish Travellers in particular? If so, how?

About the Author



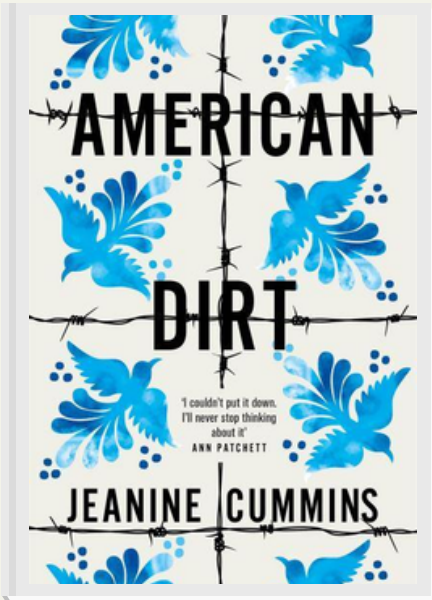
Jeanine Cummins is the author of the bestselling memoir *A Rip in Heaven*, and the novels *The Outside Boy* and *The Crooked Branch*. Her fourth book, *American Dirt*, was an Oprah's Book Club and a Barnes & Noble book Club selection. It has been translated into 34 languages and has sold more than two million copies worldwide. She lives in New York with her husband and two children.

More From Jeanine Cummins

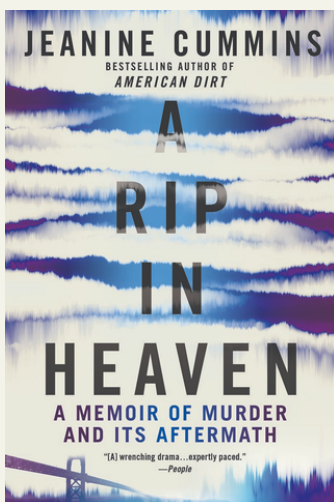


After the birth of her daughter Emma, the usually resilient Majella finds herself feeling isolated and exhausted. Then, at her childhood home in Queens, Majella discovers the diary of her maternal ancestor Ginny—and is shocked to read a story of murder in her family history.

With the famine upon her, Ginny Doyle fled from Ireland to America, but not all of her family made it. What happened during those harrowing years, and why does Ginny call herself a killer? Is Majella genetically fated to be a bad mother, despite the fierce tenderness she feels for her baby? Determined to uncover the truth of her heritage and her own identity, Majella sets out to explore Ginny's past—and discovers surprising truths about her family and ultimately, herself.



Yesterday, Lydia had a bookshop. Yesterday, Lydia was married to a journalist. Yesterday, she was with everyone she loved most in the world. Today, her eight-year-old son Luca is all she has left. For him, she will carry a machete strapped to her leg. For him, she will leap onto the roof of a high speed train. For him, she will find the strength to keep running.



A Rip in Heaven is Jeanine Cummins' story of a night in April, 1991, when her two cousins Julie and Robin Kerry, and her brother, Tom, were assaulted on the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge, which spans the Mississippi River just outside of St. Louis. When, after a harrowing ordeal, Tom managed to escape the attackers and flag down help, he thought the nightmare would soon be over. He couldn't have been more wrong. Tom, his sister Jeanine, and their entire family were just at the beginning of a horrific odyssey through the aftermath of a violent crime, a world of shocking betrayal, endless heartbreak, and utter disillusionment. It was a trial by fire from which no family member would emerge unscathed.

Who Else Writes Like...?

A readers' guide to fiction authors




DID YOU KNOW?

You can use the library's Reading Recommendation Website "Who Else Writes

Who Else Writes Like...? will help you to find something to read by uncovering new authors based on ones you already like.

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