



Clara Callan

By **Richard B. Wright**
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Introduction

It is the year 1934, and in Whitfield, Ontario, Clara Callan bids a reluctant farewell to her sister, Nora, who is bound for a career in show business in New York City. In an era when people escape from reality through radio and movies, and the growing threat of fascism in Europe is a constant worry, and when the two sisters -- vastly different in personality yet linked by their shared past -- try to locate themselves in the complex web of social expectations for unmarried young women in their 30s.

While Nora embarks on a glamorous career as a radio soap opera star, Clara, a strong and independent-minded woman, struggles to observe the traditional boundaries of her small and tight-knit community without relinquishing her dreams of love, freedom, and adventure. But Nora's letters eventually begin to reveal that her life in the big city is a little less exotic than it may seem: though her career is flourishing, her free spirit is curbed by a string of unsuccessful personal relationships.

Meanwhile, the tranquil solitude of Clara's life is shattered by a series of unforeseeable events, turns of fate that require all of her courage and strength, and that will put the seemingly unbreakable bond between the sisters to the test.

Ultimately, both discover not only the joys of love and possibility, but also the darker side of life -- violence, deception, and loss -- lurking just beneath the surface of everyday experience. Winner in 2001 of Canada's two most prestigious literary awards, the Governor General's Award and the Giller Prize, *Clara Callan* is a mesmerizing tribute to friendship and sisterhood, romance and redemption, written with powerful insight and passion.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Clara reveal about her hopes, dreams, and fears in her letters? How do her letters to Nora and Evelyn compare to her journal entries? What kinds of information does she choose to keep private? What does she decide to share?
2. How would you describe Nora? In what ways does she differ from Clara? Do these differences come across in their letters to each other? What do you think explains their deep connection as sisters?
3. What did you think of the epistolary form of narration of *Clara Callan*? How did reading the constant stream of correspondence between Nora and Clara facilitate your understanding of their relationship?
4. Discuss Clara's sudden loss of faith in God. How does she make sense of it? What is the attitude of her community towards her lapse in churchgoing? How does Nora feel about it?
5. How is sex outside of marriage portrayed in *Clara Callan*? What kinds of romantic and sexual activity were available to "respectable" women in this era?
6. How does Clara deal with being raped? Did any of her revenge fantasies surprise you?
7. How is 1930s Europe portrayed in *Clara Callan*? What did you think of the trip to Italy described in the book? Did it make any aspects of this era more vivid?
8. What is the significance of "The House on Chestnut Street." What are some of the parallels between the radio show and Clara's and Nora's own lives?
9. What role does poetry play in Clara's day-to-day existence? What are some of her poetic aspirations?
10. How is Clara's unmarried expectant state received by her community? How does she handle this development in her life? In what ways will the arrival of Elizabeth Ann change Clara?

About the author

Richard B. Wright is the author of nine novels, including *The Age of Longing*, *In the Middle of a Life*, and *Weekend Man*. He lives with his wife in Saint Catharines, Ontario.