



In the Country of the Young

By Lisa Carey
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Introduction In 1848, a ship carrying refugees from the potato famine of Ireland flounders and sinks near an island off the coast of Maine. The rescued are mostly children, survivors of eight weeks of hunger and hardship at sea. The island community absorbs the children and takes the name of the ship, Tír na nÓg or Tiranogue, an Irish name for the mythical land "The Country of the Young." One small girl, found lashed to the bow of the ship, dies almost immediately after she's brought to shore. One hundred and fifty years later on All Souls' Night in November, she accepts the invitation of an open door and flickering candle and enters the life of a 42-year-old artist working in isolation on the island. The artist, Oisín MacDara, still mourns the death of his twin sister Nieve more than 25 years ago. It is the ghost of his sister whom he hopes will visit if he leaves the door open. Instead it is Aisling who comes to him. She will haunt him for a year, a small girl who will begin to grow into an adult before his eyes as she gradually unfolds her tale. Like him, she lost a sibling--her beloved older brother, her salvation among a cruel family. Meanwhile, Oisín reveals the story of his own haunted childhood, made endurable only by the presence of his twin sister. Both Aisling and Oisín are stuck, but in each others' company, it begins to seem possible that each may grow beyond their loss. The story

unfolds on modern Tiranogue. So fatefully connected to Ireland by the tragic shipwreck, the community is still a place set apart, a blend of American and Irish culture, a shelter for myth. The reader is in a special place, *In the Country of the Young*. **Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss the relationships between the two pairs of brothers and sisters -- Aisling and Darragh and Oisín and Nieve. How does each relationship develop? How is each different from an average sibling relationship?
2. Oisín remembers that most other ghosts came back for "recognition," but he wonders if Aisling has "returned on a mission." Does she have a mission? If so, how well does she succeed?
3. How would you describe Oisín's interactions with people after his sister dies, and how does he progress after Aisling arrives?
4. At one point, Deirdre describes Oisín and Aisling as an "odd twosome, a girl growing up too fast and a man who stopped maturing too early." How would you describe the relationship between the two, and how does it change through the year?
5. Aisling concludes that Oisín's etchings are richer because of all the layering that went into their creation. Can you relate this process of layering in printmaking to the way the author structures the book?
6. The names of people and places are not chosen by chance. What names have meanings that add to the complexity of the person or place?
7. Aisling thinks "there are two different kinds of people in the world: those who know themselves and others who flounder in a forest of cast-off definitions and dreams." How would you sort the characters into these categories?
8. Compare this story to other ghost stories. What is similar and what is different? As you read, do you accept that dead people appear? Why or why not?
9. How important is it that Oisín is an artist? In what ways does his art relate to the story?
10. As a child, Oisín suspects that "women knew things that no one bothered to explain to men." Yet it is he and his grandfather who are the seers. Do you agree with these gender differences? Do you find others?

About the Author: Lisa Carey received her B.A. in English and philosophy from Boston College and her M.F.A. in creative writing from Vermont College. She won acclaim for her first novel, *The Mermaids Singing*, and now gives us a second lyric tale with an Irish flavor, *In the Country of the Young*. Ms Carey lives in New England, but she lovingly refers to Ireland as the birthplace of her adult life and work.