

The Girl Who Came Home

William Morrow Paperbacks

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ISBN: 9780062331366

Introduction

Inspired by true events, the *New York Times* bestselling novel *The Girl Who Came Home* is the poignant story of a group of Irish emigrants aboard RMS *Titanic*—a seamless blend of fact and fiction that explores the tragedy's impact and its lasting repercussions on survivors and their descendants.



Ireland, 1912. Fourteen members of a small village set sail on RMS *Titanic*, hoping to find a better life in America. For seventeen-year-old Maggie Murphy, the journey is bittersweet. Though her future lies in an unknown new place, her heart remains in Ireland with Séamus, the sweetheart she left behind. When disaster strikes, Maggie is one of the lucky few passengers in steerage who survives. Waking up alone in a New York hospital, she vows never to speak of the terror and panic of that terrible night ever again.

Chicago, 1982. Adrift after the death of her father, Grace Butler struggles to decide what comes next. When her Great Nana Maggie shares the painful secret she harbored for almost a lifetime about the *Titanic*, the revelation gives Grace new direction—and leads her and Maggie to unexpected reunions with those they thought lost long ago.

Questions for Discussion

1. The *Titanic* disaster is one of the most documented historical events of the last century. By reading the book, what new information did you learn about *Titanic*? What most surprised you about the ship or the life of passengers on board?
2. We all know the fate of *Titanic*. What impact does this knowledge have on you as you read the book? How do you feel about the Ballysheen group as they leave their homes and as they board *Titanic* at Queenstown?
3. Kathleen Dolan is single-minded in her decision to take her niece back to America with her. Discuss Kathleen's role in Maggie's life and also her role in influencing the others in the Ballysheen group to travel to America.

4. There are several key relationships in the novel. Discuss your thoughts on the relationship between any of these: Grace and Maggie; Maggie and Séamus; Maggie and her aunt Kathleen; Frances Kenny and her sister, Katie; Maggie, Peggy, and Katie ; Harry and Peggy.
5. Emigration was very common in Ireland in 1912, with many families separated by the belief and hope that there was a better standard of living to be found in America. The 8 “American wakes” were common occurrences across the country, marking the departure of loved ones. Have you experienced emigration in your own family? How would you feel if you had to make a decision similar to that made by the Irish emigrants who set sail on Titanic ?
6. Grace makes a brave decision to drop out of college and stay at home with her mother after her father’s death. Does Grace have a choice in this? How do her decision and the sacrifices she makes for her family contrast with the decisions forced upon Maggie in 1912?
7. What does Grace learn about herself through her interactions with Maggie and by reading Maggie’s Titanic journal?
8. Who are you rooting for as the drama of the events of April 14–15 unfolds ?
9. The passengers on Titanic are forced to make impossible decisions as the ship is sinking—wives leaving husbands, mothers leaving children in the care of their nannies. What do you think you would have done—or hope you would have done—under the circumstances?
10. The various warnings and predictions of disaster that the Ballysheen group experiences—the reading of the tea leaves, the warning from the stranger at Queenstown, the dropped “lucky” sovereign—are based on recorded facts. The near miss with the New York in the Southampton docks at the very start of Titanic’s journey also really happened. In addition, a novella, titled *Futility*; or *The Wreck of the Titan* was written in 1898 by Morgan Robertson and seems to predict much of the Titanic disaster: a large ocean liner sinks one April night in the North Atlantic after colliding with an iceberg and there are not enough lifeboats for all the passengers. Discuss the many aspects of superstition and myth that surround Titanic.
11. Maggie and the other survivors were in their lifeboat for eight hours before they were picked up, and they were then on board *Carpathia* for several days. Had you considered the experience of the survivors before reading this book? Discuss the extent of their ordeal after getting safely off Titanic.
12. Maggie discovers twenty-five dollars pinned to her clothing as compensation from the White Star Line and recalls signing a disclaimer for the company. This was actually recorded as happening to one of the survivors, Annie Kate Kelly. What is your reaction when reading this? Are you surprised that the shipping company would take advantage of survivors in that way?
13. Families and friends of passengers on Titanic were left confused and searching for answers about the fate of their loved ones, with early press reports stating that everyone had survived and later reports correctly reporting huge losses of life. Why do you think there was so much delay and confusion in confirming the facts and issuing survivor lists? Had you considered this aspect of the tragedy before reading this book?
14. Many Titanic survivors were reluctant to talk about their experiences. Are you surprised by Maggie’s reluctance to talk about Titanic with her own family? What comments do you have about Maggie’s experience of survivor guilt?

15. There have been many other shipping tragedies since Titanic. Cunard's passenger liner RMS Lusitania (traveling from New York to Liverpool) sank off the coast of Ireland in 1915 when the liner was struck by a torpedo fired from a German submarine. There were 1,198 civilian fatalities in the event. In the light of many tragedies with great loss of life since 1912, why do you think people continue to be so fascinated by Titanic a hundred years later?

