

## The Library at the Edge of the World

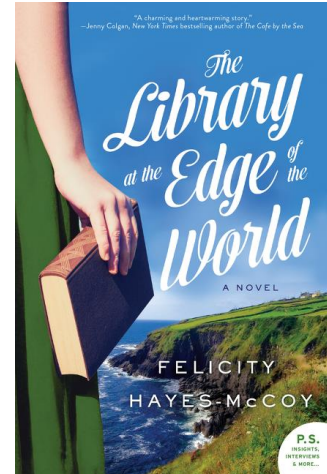
Harper Perennial

By Felicity Hayes-McCoy

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### Introduction

In the bestselling tradition of Fannie Flagg and Jenny Colgan comes Felicity Hayes-McCoy's U.S. debut about a local librarian who must find a way to rebuild her community and her own life in this touching, enchanting novel set on Ireland's stunning West Coast.



As she drives her mobile library van between villages of Ireland's West Coast, Hanna Casey tries not to think about a lot of things. Like the sophisticated lifestyle she abandoned after finding her English barrister husband in bed with another woman. Or that she's back in Lissbeg, the rural Irish town she walked away from in her teens, living in the back bedroom of her overbearing mother's retirement bungalow. Or, worse yet, her nagging fear that, as the local librarian and a prominent figure in the community, her failed marriage and ignominious return have made her a focus of gossip.

With her teenage daughter, Jazz, off traveling the world and her relationship with her own mother growing increasingly tense, Hanna is determined to reclaim her independence by restoring a derelict cottage left to her by her great-aunt. But when the threatened closure of the Lissbeg Library puts her personal plans in jeopardy, Hanna finds herself leading a battle to restore the heart and soul of the Finfarran Peninsula's fragmented community. And she's about to discover that the neighbors she'd always kept at a distance have come to mean more to her than she ever could have imagined.

Told with heart and abundant charm, *The Library at the Edge of the World* is a joyous story about the meaning of home and the importance of finding a place where you truly belong.

### Questions for Discussion

1. At the time of her divorce "Hanna's pride had been so hurt...that she wasn't capable of being sensible." How have the decisions that she made affected her at the opening of the book? In what ways can hurt pride cause one to undermine one's own happiness?
2. Hanna and her mother, Mary, are constantly at loggerheads. In what ways are their characters similar and dissimilar? How do you think that affects their relationship? Has Jazz, Hanna's daughter, inherited any of her mother or grandmother's personality traits?

3. Conor, Hanna's assistant has a visceral response to the old books kept in the closed bookcase in Lissbeg library, describing their smell and his love of their decorated endpapers. Why do you think he's so attracted to them? Have you ever felt that way about a book? Do you think anything gets lost when reading on an e-reader rather than a physical book? How do you prefer to read books?
4. Of course, the Lissbeg Library is at the very heart of the novel, but what do you think makes it so special to the Lissbeg community? What do you think about the role it plays in preserving gathering-places and sharing knowledge? How does the library function in your own community?
5. "Hanna had no interest in reading when she was young...it was pictures that had mattered to her first. Words had come later." Do early memories of one's relationship to books affect one's life as a reader? If one begins with a bad experience can it be adjusted later? Does it make a difference to one's experience as a reader if one has heard stories told before coming to books?
6. Malcolm, Hanna's ex-husband, "...had been raised to assume he had a God-given right to whatever he wanted, and his instinct was to manipulate everyone and everything around him in order to get it." This instinct has caused him to lie to Jazz about the divorce. Is there any sense in which the lie was justified? In terms of both her actions and emotions, how has his decision warped Hanna's process of recovery after the split? What would you have done in Hanna's position?
7. Hanna and Jazz used to spend the summer in Ireland, but they experience their move back to Finfarran very differently: Jazz feels uprooted where Hanna begrudges her homecoming. How do you think this impacts their relationship? Their integration with the community? If you had to return home at this stage in your life, what would that mean to you?
8. When the book begins Hanna is almost the archetype of a starchy old-fashioned librarian. Is she aware of this? Does she find it painful or ironic? Is she conscious of the degree to which it has made her unattractive, or of the extent to which it has inhibited her recovery after the divorce?
9. Mary Casey is a serial texter. How has the author used this to create comedy, tension and drama throughout the book? What other aspects of technology add to the comedy, drama and plotting of the novel?
10. "The solitary pleasure of driving through stunning scenery was well worth the extra hour that the mobile library added to Hanna's work days." Why might this solitary experience be preferable in Hanna's mind to the interaction with her neighbors that her library job requires? Do you empathize with Hanna's need for quiet? Why or why not?
11. Hanna faces the daunting but crucial task of renovating her Great-Aunt's house. What does this project represent to Hanna? How do you think the challenge of creating a home—both

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literally and figuratively—affects her integration into the community? More generally, what might it suggest about the importance of creating space for yourself?

12. “Oddly enough (Conor) liked Miss Casey.” What does Conor see in Hanna that her other neighbors don’t? How does the author use Conor as a character to mitigate Hanna’s less attractive characteristics in the early part of the book? How important is his role as an observer throughout the book as a whole?
13. “If it hadn’t been for the library, Conor would have been on the emigrant boat and the land the McCarthys had farmed for generations would have been sold off to strangers.” Does the strongly Irish theme of emigration have a more universal application? Are the difficulties faced by the young people of the area typical of isolated rural communities everywhere?
14. At the same time, *The Library at the Edge of the World* is a novel rooted in place, typified by Conor and Fury O’Shea’s self-identification with the land and landscape of Finfarran. How would you describe the landscape’s effect on the community? How does it impact the unity and deep history of the Peninsula? How does it manifest in characters like Fury?
15. “Conor had been delighted to think that by introducing [Fury] to Miss Casey he’d be setting up a match made in heaven. Instead of which, he seemed to have started a war.” What characteristics do Hanna and Fury share? What role does he play, emotionally, psychologically and practically, in her redemption? To what extent do his links to the forest and the psalter give him a symbolic function in the novel?
16. Felicity Hayes-McCoy is a fluent Irish (Gaelic) speaker and Irish is still spoken in the community where she lives. English is the first language of her fictional Finfarran Peninsula but, as in most rural Irish areas, the rhythms and much of the spoken idiom derives from Irish. Do words and language affect and represent a person’s sense of identity? Does one change one’s use of to assert authority or invite confidence in one’s relationships with others? Is language used in particular ways within families or close relationships to define hierarchy or demonstrate intimacy?
17. Like Hanna, Brian is a book-lover with a strong sense of the visual and, like her, he has been hurt and become introspective. What characteristics does he have and lack which make her inclined to trust him? When Sister Michael’s plan requires Hanna to be less than open with him, how is her growing relationship with Brian affected?
18. “The old nun’s warmth and confidence seemed eclipsed by the priest’s chilly air of authority, yet it was she, not he, who had provided what his parishioners required.” How does Sister Michael’s approach to the community differ from Father McGlynn’s? To what extent, and in what ways, do their respective genders and ages affect their approach to, and perception of, their roles within the community?
19. Castle Lancy is symbolic of the legacy of the Irish War of Independence (1919 to 1921), and Ireland’s long history of occupation by Britain. How is the community still impacted by the

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legacy of cultural and political conflict? What do you think the castle represents to the inhabitants of Lissbeg? What do you make of Fury's relationship with Charles Aukin?

20. At the end of the novel, Fury comments that "God knows, those de Lancys owe this place a lot." What does Fury mean by this? What does it symbolize that the Carrick Psalter—an artefact rich with Ireland's complicated history—ultimately saves the library? More generally, what role does the past play in our present?