

The Mistletoe Matchmaker

Harper Perennial

By Felicity Hayes-McCoy

ISBN: 9780062799067

Introduction

The days are turning colder, preparations are under way for the Winter Fest, and everyone is hoping for a little holiday magic on the Finfarran peninsula. And as Cassie Fitzgerald, fresh from Toronto, is about to discover, there's more to the holidays on the west coast of Ireland than mistletoe and mince pies.



Enchanted by the small town where her dad was born, Cassie makes friends and joins local librarian Hanna Casey's writing group in Lissbeg Library. But the more she's drawn into the festivities leading up to her first Irish Christmas, the more questions she wants to ask.

Why does her sweet-tempered grandmother Pat find it so hard to express her feelings? What's going on between Pat and her miserly husband Ger? What happened in the past between the Fitzgeralds and Hanna's redoubtable mother Mary Casey? And what about Shay: handsome, funny, smart, and intent on making Cassie's stay as exciting as he can. Could he be the one for her?

As Christmas Eve approaches, it's Cassie, the outsider, who reminds Lissbeg's locals that love, family, and friendship bring true magic to the season. But will her own, fractured family rediscover the joys of coming home?

Questions for Discussion

1. While Pat knows she can get online information about last dates for mailing cards and gifts overseas, she loves to pick up a leaflet in the post office as part of her personal "countdown to Christmas." Do you have any special holiday countdown rituals? Do you send Christmas cards?
2. Cassie has never been to Ireland, yet she's always longed to go there, and has a sense of it as home. Do you have Irish roots? Have you been to Ireland? Whether or not your family roots are in Ireland, do you feel drawn to it as Cassie does? Or is there another country or place where you don't live and yet which feels like home?
3. The book describes many Irish Christmas traditions. Were any of them familiar to you? Did any feel foreign? Were there some you could relate to because they were similar to, though not the same as, your own family or community's holiday traditions?

4. Bríd and Aideen are cousins and close friends. Yet when Conor has the idea of Aideen renting a room to Cassie to save money towards their wedding, it sparks a row between the girls. Later Bríd admits to herself that she's hurt that Aideen "who'd always deferred to her advice, had moved on and was focused on Conor." Do you think this often happens when one of two girlfriends gets engaged? What do you think of Bríd's character? How do you think you'd react in the same situation?
5. With Christmas approaching, Brian invites Hanna to spend the holiday with him in an ice hotel in Lapland. Hanna longs to go but worries that she should be with her family at Christmas. Are you ever irritated by the assumptions about Christmas as "family time?" Do the holidays bring pressures as well as pleasure? If so, how do you think it's best to navigate them?
6. Mince pies (little pastry cases filled with a mixture of dried fruits and spices) are traditional Christmas fare in Ireland. What are your favorite Christmas foods? Do you have special recipes you use only at Christmas? If so, were they handed down through generations, and did they come by word of mouth, written on scraps of paper, or in cookery books? Do particular holiday foods unlock childhood memories for you?
7. Mary Casey is a serial texter. In Chapter 8 Hanna reflects that Louisa's company in the bungalow might mean there'd be "fewer demanding texts" from Mary. Do you think technology and social media help to keep seniors from feeling isolated and lonely? Is there a space like The Old Convent Centre in your community which brings generations together?
8. Fury and The Divil are high on the list of Finfarran readers' top favorite characters. Do you see The Divil as a character in the novel? What do you think of the relationship between the two? Have you ever had a pet to which you felt so close that you seemed to communicate on a special level?
9. "I guess Irish people don't like straight questions." Communication and the lack of it are central themes in the book. Ger doesn't speak till the final chapters. Dan wishes he could talk to Bríd about his problems. Pat worries that Ger is having an affair but won't ask. Cassie cuts through this reticence by asking straight questions and saying what she thinks. Do you think her approach is a good thing? Does she learn anything useful from the unfamiliar assumptions she encounters in Ireland? Does she approach things differently because she's Canadian? Or because she's young? Or a bit of both?
10. In the book we see Pat repeatedly failing to put something on paper for the library's creative writing group. We also see that she's smart, observant and has an enquiring mind and a good imagination. Why do you think she finds it so hard to write down her thoughts? Have you ever joined a writers' group? If so, did you enjoy it, and did it help your writing? Why did you want to write? Have you ever kept a diary, or do you enjoy writing letters? Do you like reading what you've written aloud?

-
11. Dan and Bríd both want to grow their own businesses. Dan finds it difficult, partly because he hasn't known where to turn for professional help. Even in the local bank, "Everything was automated and you couldn't find someone to talk to." Do you think he's unusual, or is it the case that young people as well as seniors often find the technological world daunting? Do you think that men, more than women, find it hard to admit they need help? Do you think they're less likely to seek it?
 12. Christmas Craft Fairs, where handmade gifts are bought and sold, are popular in Ireland. Often, they involve charity raffles. In the book, Fury carves figures for a Nativity Scene (called a "crib" in Ireland) and explains to Cassie why he's shown St Joseph and the Virgin slumped in exhaustion. "You'd be pretty knackered if you'd been wandering the streets for hours with a pregnant wife, looking for shelter. And you probably wouldn't be kneeling in adoration if you'd just given birth." The money raised by a raffle for his crib goes to a shelter for the homeless and, when the sum turns out to be small, he augments it with the money he's made by disposing of the smuggled brandy. What do you think of the morality of that? Does your community raise money for charity at Christmas? If so, what kinds of causes benefit and how are they chosen?
 13. "This was the book Pat had lovingly sent for her thirteenth birthday. The book she'd lied about and said she loved though, in fact, she'd never opened it." Because she hasn't had a chance to get to know them, Pat has spent years sending ill-chosen gifts to her grandchildren and, in order to make her feel good, Cassie has assured her she loved a book which, in fact, was unsuitable for her age-group. What do you think of their dilemma? Have you ever enthused about a gift you disliked? Do you find it hard to buy gifts for family members you hardly know? Do you feel pressure not to leave anyone out when you're sending Christmas cards or presents?
 14. "'Being Min the Match' was a family expression derived from the name of some ancient Irish relation who'd apparently been famous for meddling." On coming to Finfarran, Cassie discovers that Min, Ger's aunt, was a matchmaker, "a quiet woman, and well-liked, and people could trust her." When Cassie begins her romance with Shay, she has no idea that he's already married. Later, she's angry with herself for trusting him. According to Pat, "romance wasn't in fashion in Min's day." How would you define romance, and how important do you think it is in a marriage? Is there/was there a tradition of matchmaking or arranged marriages in your own family?
 15. In the library's creative reading group, Saira chooses to read aloud from Sister Michael's herb book because "the names of the flowers and plants are like a poem." Cassie decides that her "low voice with its sing-song inflections made poetry out of them." Do you think Saira and Cassie are right? If so, why? If not, what qualities do you think define a poem?
 16. In the book's prologue Pat lists the foodstuffs she buys in her countdown to Christmas. "There'd be long boxes of sticky black dates preserved in honey, and old-fashioned sweets that Pat's husband ate, like Hadji Bey's Turkish Delight, and things she liked herself, like Amaoretti. And chocolate Bath Oliver biscuits in tall tins." Later, Bríd decides on produce to

sell at the Winter Fest. “Mini plum puddings, chocolate Yule Logs, pots of cranberry jelly tied up with gold ribbons, salmon roulade, and oat biscuits in hand-painted boxes.” Though some of the indulgent ingredients are the same, there’s a difference between the two lists because they’re compiled by characters of different generations. Have you, or has anyone in your family, introduced new Christmas foods, or established new rituals which have now become family traditions? If so, how and why?

17. As a librarian, Hanna is overwhelmed by the Carrick Psalter with its medieval penmanship and illustrations. While its religious connotations mean little to her, she never approaches the psalter without reverence, and whenever she sees “the flowing images that had emerged from the scribes’ deft pen strokes,” she’s “shaken by an exuberant sense of their power.” Can you relate to this feeling? Are there books that you love because of their beautiful binding or illustrations, the feel of the paper or the way the words are laid out on the page? Do you think appearance sometimes draws you to one book rather than another in a bookstore or library?
18. “All kinds of memories they could have made that were never made at all. At this stage it didn’t matter why or how it had happened: what mattered now was that they still had time.” In the scene when Pat finds that Ger’s dying, she regrets the fact that they haven’t talked throughout their marriage. But they remain inarticulate and express their love through sharing the homemade mince pies and the Christmas ritual of kissing under the mistletoe. Do you think that words are vital for communication, or can gestures and symbols be equally effective?
19. At the start of the book, before Cassie leaves Canada, she gives her Mom, Annette, a pendant she’s chosen in a marketplace in Barbados. In terms of how the book is written, Annette’s negative response to the gift foreshadows Cassie’s own lack of interest in the childhood gift of The Turf-cutter’s Donkey from Pat. Can you identify other places in *The Mistletoe Matchmaker* where one character’s experience is echoed in another’s, or where the author has woven the same themes through different strands of the story?
20. In the final scene, when Cassie, on the roof of the Old Convent Centre, holds up her phone to show the snow-covered streets of the town he dad grew up in, she hopes he’ll come to believe what Fury has told her – that “it’s best to make your peace with the past while the people you love are still here”. Do you think that this is what the book is saying? And what do you make of Fury’s warning, that whatever went wrong between her dad and his parents is really none of Cassie’s business? Do you think that, by the end of the book, Cassie has learned to approach complex relationships more carefully? Or have her direct approach and habit of asking straight questions been the means by which she’s begun to draw her family back together?