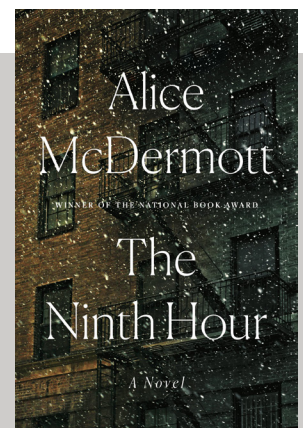


CATHOLIC BOOK CLUB

SPRING 2018

ONLINE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS By Kevin Spinale, S.J.

1. What do you think of Sally's three adoptive aunts: Sister Jeanne, Sister Illuminata and Sister Lucy? Consider their soliloquy-like addresses at various points in the novel: Jeanne (51-54, 72-74, 181-183, and the final chapter of the book), Illuminata (77-79, 88-91, 186-187, 191), and Lucy (109-113).
2. Perhaps the most interesting of the three aunt-nuns is Sister Lucy. She has the ability to barge in on people's lives—the lives of strangers—and attempt to rectify what is wrong. She has the gall to govern other lives. Yet, she lives with a "tight knot of fury in her chest" (110). Is she a good person? Is she a remarkable woman? Is she holy and selfless like Illuminata and Jeanne?
3. Lucy also has clear and distinct thoughts about marriage—particularly about women and their roles in marriage. She cares for Mrs. Costello with "exquisite gentleness" yet dismisses her as someone who feigns suffering (109). How does one respond to Lucy and her idea of married life (115)?
4. Lucy also has an insight into Sally's vocation: "Marriage might settle her. Not the convent" (126). Did Sally have a vocation? How exactly was it lost? What of her train ride to Chicago? Two women—not men—repulse her and provoke her decision to return home.
5. What about Sister Jeanne who understands Sally's vocation as a reparation—not for Jim, but for something else (133)? She speaks of fairness throughout the book. Is her understanding of God fair?
6. Jeanne also speaks often of restoration. She tells the story of Jeanne Jugan and the restoration of her honor as foundress. Is Jeanne herself restored as Sally's caregiver in the end? Is her love for Sally somehow selfish?
7. Do you know of anyone who reminds you of Sister Illuminata? Someone expert in his or her simple craft (41)? Someone who labors in a seemingly tedious job for years? Would anyone, in his or her right mind, take up a task such as Illuminata's today? Do such tasks exist anymore?
8. Illuminata's brief experience in the TB sanatorium shaped her understanding of human sexuality. She understands sex to be a hunger—"there is a hunger" in us that supersedes circumstance and suffering (186-187). Does she not also have a hunger for affection?



The Ninth Hour:
A Novel
by Alice McDermott
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 256p
\$26.00

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9. Determinism: are not Lucy's, Sally's, and Illuminata's lives determined by their families and circumstance? Is not Sally's melancholy inherited from her father? Are not Lucy and Illuminata's lives shaped by their mothers? Are we thus determined?
10. What of Annie? Is she selfish? Is she human? Does she not have a right to catch her breath?
11. What of Mr. Costello? We only skim over his character. Does he suffer a perfunctory conversion? Is he shameful?
12. Smell. Scents permeate this novel, from the burning cinder smell that lingers in Annie's apartment to the odor of sanctity surrounding Sr. St. Saviour's death, from the unwashed smell of the woman on the train and the odor of rot in Mrs. Costello's scalp to the lovely perfumed handkerchief in which Sally transports the alum. Smell also seems to key Jeanne in on what Sally ultimately does while wishing for lilacs and a June wedding. Does Alice McDermott have an overactive sense of smell? Or, is it somehow that smell too is Catholic?
13. What is with the courtyard—the unkempt backyard into which Annie screamed at a man for beating a child and in which Mrs. Costello was bitten by a dog? Is this purgatory? Is it somehow haunted or possessed—Jim's hands around Annie's waist pulling her back in?
14. At the ninth hour, Jesus exclaims from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Ultimately, is this novel about rectifying abandonment?
15. Why did she do it, and why did Jeanne say nothing?
16. Is Jeanne really complicit?
17. Lastly, these sentences toward the end of novel pain me somewhat: "That the holy nuns who sailed through the house when we were young were a dying breed even then...The call to sanctity and self-sacrifice, the delusion and superstition it required, fading from the world even then" (241). Is this the case? Is it the case that a vocation to religious life requires delusion and superstition coupled with selflessness?



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