

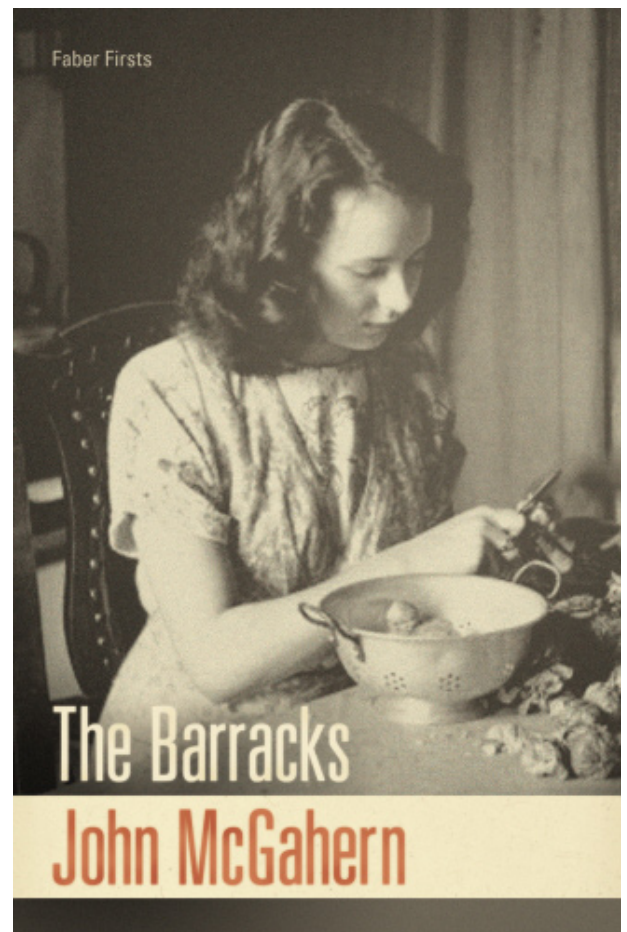
Faber Firsts

The Barracks by John McGahern

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The Barracks by John McGahern In brief

Set in rural West Ireland not long after the end of the Second World War, *The Barracks* sees Elizabeth Reegan, living in a police barracks with her husband - a frustrated policeman - and his three children. She spent several years nursing in London during the war but returned home to Ireland after the experience. She married Reegan in the hope of finding a loving and independent home away from her own family, but now fondly reminisces about her time living in London. She has no real emotional connection with her husband, who is having his own struggle for freedom from his job in the police force, and she has not developed the relationship she had hoped for with his children. She is exhausted by the drudgery of domestic life, and she is increasingly aware of her own ill health, suspecting she is suffering from breast cancer. She is. Tragic, unsettling yet comedic at times, Elizabeth's internal struggle for some purpose to life is a powerful voice in Irish literature, written at a pivotal time in the country's forging its identity.





Background

First published in 1963, *The Barracks* is actually set in the late 1940s, shortly after the end of the Second World War. Elizabeth Reegan, now married and committed to her husband and his three children, worked and lived in London during the war, which afforded her – and many other women of the time – a previously unheard of degree of freedom. Nurses and their work were invaluable at the time, and it was an exhilarating time for many, as much as a distressing one. Elizabeth is clear about the expectations placed on her by her family though, and sees life as a wife and step-mother as a way of escaping them,

However, there is a great deal of emotional distance between Elizabeth and her husband and children. Much of the tension in the novel comes from the fact that Elizabeth feels so alone, and unable to express either her frustration at the way her life has turned out, her search for meaning in the everyday or her distress about the development of her illness. Written at a time when few novels expressed women's dissatisfaction with their domestic lot, *The Barracks* is all the more interesting for having been written by a man.

The novel does not neglect its male characters though, with Reegan, Elizabeth's husband, being an equally powerful portrayal of a man aching to escape the confinements of his everyday obligations. In his case, he longs to be free from his boss and his role in the police force, yearning for a more rural way of making a living.

Elizabeth is at first reluctant to seek medical help for the cancer she suspects is growing in her breast. Having worked as a nurse, she is aware of the procedures that would await her, and for a time prefers to find solace in the routine of running a household. But it is her cancer that comes to dominate the novel, in some extremely powerful scenes. It also prompts her to reflect on her time spent in London, and its affect on her life in Ireland now.

Written when Ireland was forging its identity as a relatively new nation, it sees John McGahern establish himself as one of the 20th Century's leading Irish novelists.

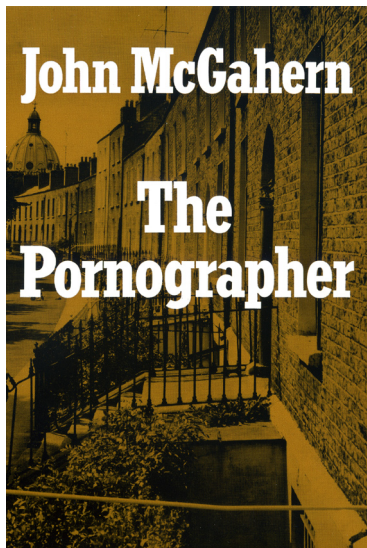
For discussion

- McGahern writes largely from a woman's perspective in *The Barracks*. Do you find his voice authentic? If so, are there any specific techniques that he has used which helped this? Or are there moments where you find Elizabeth does not ring true?
- Elizabeth's frame of mind is often expressed by a description of her emotions or internalised thoughts, whereas we get to know her husband through his speech and his deeds. Do you think that this is a reflection of Elizabeth's loneliness or to do think it is a result of McGahern deliberately using different devices for the characters in order to create more rounded portrayals?
- The novel focuses on the minutiae of daily rural life. How does McGahern achieve this depiction of the drudgery of routine chores without lapsing into repetition? Do you think that he has succeeded?
- Reegan is portrayed as being as dissatisfied as his life, but for different reasons. Do you find him as sympathetic a character as Elizabeth, despite him not being ill?
- *The Barracks* was written at a time with the Women's Movement was not a widely known or discussed one. It is all the more powerful for this. But do you think McGahern is balanced in expressing men's desire and need to feel love and have experience a satisfactory career?
- We see that Elizabeth was tied to her family before she was committed to Reegan and his. She was aware that it was going to be expected of her to look after her 'crippled' mother if she had stayed unmarried. How else does McGahern depict her as somehow 'trapped' by obligations?
- McGahern's mother died of cancer when he was young. Do you think that this has informed his writing in *The Barracks*? Can you think of other instances from first novels that feature situations that may have affected the author's real life?
- The novel features some powerful imagery, such as Elizabeth's description of herself as 'a flower that has withered in a vase behind curtains'. Are there any lines in particular that you noticed or that affected you?
- The novel opens with the images of growing darkness, and the coming of the end of the day. Do you think that this is simply atmospheric or specifically thematic, referring to the to Elizabeth's illness?
- There are scenes when Elizabeth reflects on her time in London, the freedom and heartache that she experienced. How do you think that this impacts the descriptions of her life in Ireland? Do you think that they add to the novel?
- This was McGahern's first novel, as has been acclaimed as being very confident for a debut. Do you think you would be able to tell that it was a first work if you did not know it was? Have you read any of McGahern's other works, and if so, how do they compare?
- The Guardian's obituary of John McGahern describes him as 'hailed as Ireland's most important novelist since Beckett'. Would you agree with this, on the basis of *The Barracks*? Or do you think that it is only his later novels and short stories that merit this description?



About the author

John McGahern was born in Dublin in 1934 and brought up in the Republic of Ireland. He trained to be a primary-school teacher before becoming a full-time writer, and later taught and travelled extensively. He lived in County Leitrim. The author of six highly acclaimed novels and four collections of short stories, he was the recipient of numerous awards and honours, including a Society of Authors Travelling Scholarship, the American-Irish Award, the Prix Etrangère Ecureuil and the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. *Amongst Women*, which won both the GPA and the Irish Times Award, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and made into a four-part BBC television series. His work appeared in numerous anthologies and has been translated into many languages. In 2005, his autobiography, *Memoir*, won the South Bank Literature Award. John McGahern died in 2006.



Resources

<http://www.lannan.org/lf/rc/event/john-mcgahern/>

Audio link to John McGahern in conversation with Hermione Lee in 2004

<http://archives.library.nuigalway.ie/cgi-bin/FramedList.cgi?P71>

List for John McGahern's Literary Archive at National University of Ireland, Galway

Suggested further reading

The Sea by John Banville

Watt by Samuel Beckett

At Swim, Two Boys by Jamie O'Neill

The Story of Lucy Gault by William Trevor

The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne by Brian Moore

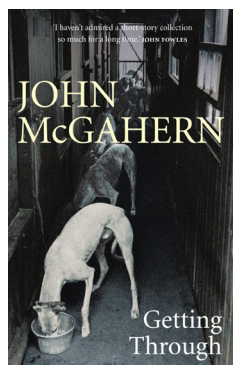
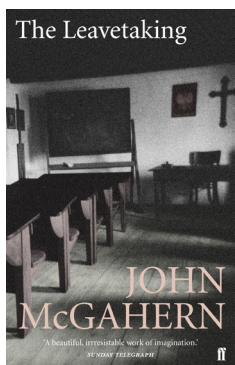
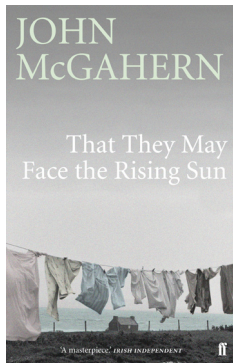
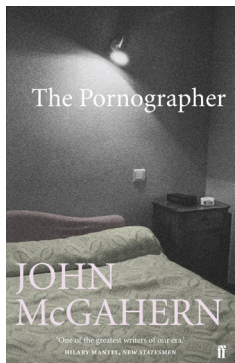
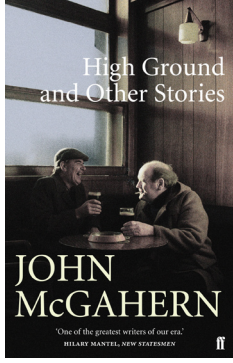
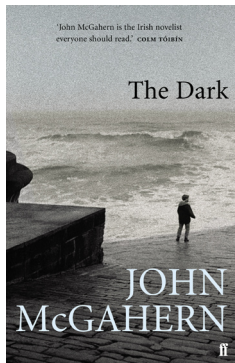
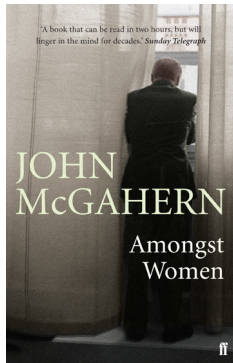
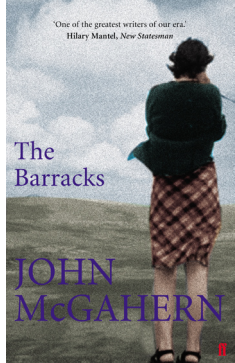
The Secret Scripture by Sebastian Barry

The Gathering by Anne Enright

The Blackwater Lightship by Colm Toibin

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates

Faber Book Club: *The Barracks* by John McGahern



Other books by John McGahern

Fiction

- The Barracks (1963)
- The Dark (1965)
- The Leavetaking (1975)
- The Pornographer (1980)
- Amongst Women (1990)
- That They May Face the Rising Sun (2001) Published in the USA under the title By the Lake (2002)

Non-Fiction

- Memoir (2005)
- Published in the U.S.A. in 2006 under the title All Will Be Well

Short Story Collections

- Nightlines (1970)
- Getting Through (1978)
- High Ground (1985)
- Creatures of the Earth: New and Selected Stories (2006)

Drama

- Sinclair (1971) (radio)
- Swallows (1975) (television)
- The Rockingham Shoot (1987) (television)
- The Power of Darkness (1991) (theatre)

