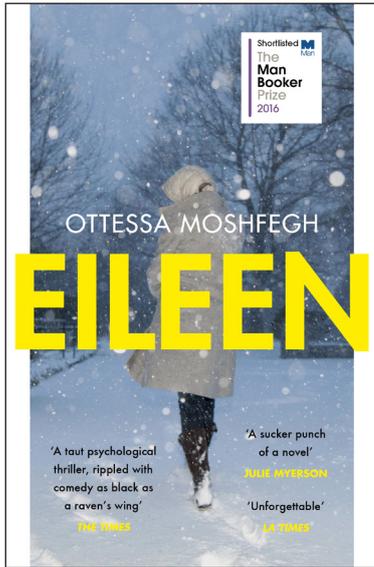


# VINTAGE READING GUIDE



## SYNOPSIS

The Christmas season offers little cheer for Eileen Dunlop. Trapped between caring for her alcoholic father and her job as a secretary at the boys' prison, she tempers her dreary days with dreams of escaping to the big city. In the meantime, her nights and weekends are filled with shoplifting and cleaning up her increasingly deranged father's messes.

When the beautiful, charismatic Rebecca Saint John arrives on the scene as the new counsellor at the prison, Eileen is enchanted, unable to resist what appears to be a miraculously budding friendship. But soon, Eileen's affection for Rebecca will pull her into a crime that far surpasses even her own wild imagination.

## QUESTIONS

- *Eileen* has been praised for the vivid, and often dark, exploration of its protagonist's interior life. How did it feel to be inside the head of a character like that? Discuss, also, any moments of light and levity in the novel.
- 'What a good girl I was, in hindsight, buttoning my father's shirt and tying his shoes and all. I knew in my heart that I was good, I suppose.' Is Eileen the hero, the villain or the victim of her story? Discuss how the book explores morality.
- The book is narrated by Eileen as a much older woman, how does the space between narrative and narrator affect the development of the story?
- The narrator tells us that 'this is not a love story' and at times that a certain detail or scene is 'not the point of this at all'. Do you always agree with her? Does this narrative-signposting help us understand the 'point' of it all? What effect does this interjection have on the plot?
- Eileen works at a youth correctional facility. What role does entrapment play in the novel?
- What changes when Eileen becomes the owner of her father's gun? Discuss the relationship between authority and violence in the novel.
- What does Eileen mean when she puts on her 'death mask'? Discuss the importance of appearance and body image. How does the novel address the female body?
- 'Rebecca and I would be best friends forever... Everything would be beautiful.' Do you believe Rebecca's friendliness is genuine? Or is she only manipulating Eileen to her own advantage, as Eileen comes to believe? How does the novel depict friendship and human connection?

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- The novel has a Hitchcockian feel to it. In what ways is *Eileen* similar to classic noir, and in what ways is it different?
- *Eileen* is set in the 1960s, but far from the glamour we often associate with that period. In what ways is the period setting reflected in the book?

## IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: BODY

- The body is at times a source of shame, disgust, violence, fascination and envy in the novel. Most of the characters are in some way physically violated, abused, restrained or ignored. In particular, Eileen obsesses over, represses and indulges her body: camouflaging her femininity in dowdy, over-sized clothes, binge-drinking, taking laxatives. Perhaps most striking is her obsession with bowel movements: 'I was easily roused by the grosser habits of the human body – toilet business not least of all.'
- What role does corporeality perform in the novel? Discuss the most extreme and most quotidian attentions to the body. How do these contribute to the plot and mood of the story?

## IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: LIKEABILITY

- Eileen has been generally perceived as an unlikeable and even repulsive character. She enjoys living in her own filth, is obsessed with her bowel movements, and most of the time she wishes her father were dead. Of her own moral character, she tells: 'I was a shoplifter, a pervert, you might say, and a liar.' Do you agree with her self-assessment? How does Eileen's 'likability' affect your reading? Are there moments that shock or fill you with awe? Does liking the protagonist matter?
- In an interview with the *Guardian*\* Moshfegh says, 'Eileen is not perverse. I think she's totally normal... I haven't written a freak character; I've written an honest character.' Do you agree? Discuss the different ways truth is explored in the novel.

\*<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/16/ottessa-moshfegh-interview-book-started-as-joke-man-booker-prize-shortlist>

## IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION: NARRATION

- At the end of the very first chapter we read: 'So here we are. My name was Eileen Dunlop. Now you know me... This is the story of how I disappeared.' And so we learn very early on that something is going to happen, and soon. The novel is peppered with hints of an impending schism. How does this foreboding affect the reading experience? In what other ways does the author build suspense and mystery?

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- Eileen tells her story as an old woman, looking back at a twenty-four-year-old version of herself. Her memory, she admits, is fallible and there are some things she remembers more clearly than others. She also benefits from hindsight. How might this unreliable narration affect the story? What is its effect on the plot and perception of the characters? Is the narrator Eileen a different character from the young Eileen?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Otessa Moshfegh is a fiction writer from Boston. She was awarded the Plimpton Prize for her stories in *The Paris Review* and granted a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. One of the stories in this collection, 'Slumming', recently won an O. Henry Award. Her novel *Eileen* was awarded the 2016 Pen/Hemingway Award and is shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.