February 18, 2002 and February 10, 2010 **Murdoch**

Here is some information about Iris Murdoch cut & pasted from the Grolier's Encyclopedia, and questions for discussion for The Bell, The Sea, the Sea, and Under the Net.

Martha Nussbaum has an article about Murdoch, "When She was Good" in the January 2002 issue of the New Republic: http://www.sackett.net/MurdochArticleByNussbaum.pdf.

Discussion Guide for Iris Murdoch, The Bell

The following is from https://store.greatbooks.org/the-bell-great-books-discussion-guide.html. I added page numbers from the 317 page paperback Triad/Panther Books edition bracketed in red:

Introduction

Like the great realists Tolstoy, Eliot, and James, Iris Murdoch is preeminently concerned with the problem of how to live ethically in a world of accelerating change and declining faith. She studied and wrote philosophy as well as fiction, and her novels explore the fate of ideas once they are subjected to the exigencies of daily life. Murdoch's ability to blend social satire with a sharply observant yet compassionate view of her characters is fully displayed in The Bell, often considered her most characteristic and satisfying novel.

The novel begins with Dora Greenfield reluctantly setting out for Imber Court, a fledgling lay community just outside the walls of an Anglican convent, to rejoin her estranged husband, Paul. The spiritual goals of the group gathered at Imber Court enable Murdoch to investigate the question of whether moral absolutes must be modified to accommodate human nature. The community is started by the Abbess of Imber Abbey and Michael Meade, owner of the Imber Court property and a frustrated would-be priest with a checkered career as a schoolmaster. The Abbess proposes the lay community as a "buffer state" between the world and the convent, a refuge for the "half-contemplative" who "can live neither in the world nor out of it" (p. 71 [81]). This modified religious aspiration is further diluted by the mixed motives of many of Imber Court's residents, and the community verges on becoming a mere house party. In this light, Mrs. Mark's admonitions about following rules have a serious aspect, despite her strident self-importance. As Mrs. Mark, one of the Court's residents, tells Dora in a rare moment of insight, "trying to live up to ideals does often make one look ridiculous" (p. 224 [242]).

The bell that gives the novel its title embodies the emotional forces that draw people to Imber Court and threaten to destroy it. The bell's meaning and power are ambiguous to the characters and the reader alike, not least because there are two bells-the Abbey's original bell, lost centuries earlier, and the new bell scheduled to replace it. Paul takes satisfaction in telling his adulterous wife the legend of the original bell flying into the lake when a nun at the Abbey refused to confess to having a lover and then drowned herself. When Dora and Toby, the idealistic student who has come to Imber Court to explore communal religious life, retrieve the lost bell from the lake, they discover that its inscription reads "I am the voice of Love" (p. 205 [221]). The bell and the legend highlight the struggle

between divine and human love that many of the characters, particularly Michael and Catherine, the postulant secretly in love with Michael, experience acutely.

The significance of Dora's plan to secretly switch the old bell for the new one is as ambiguous as the bell itself; whether she wants to "play the witch" (p. 184 [199]) to undo the community or "make a miracle" (p. 183 [198]) is unclear. But when Dora hears Nick, Catherine's troubled and occasionally malicious brother, telling her lover Noel about the plan, she must weigh her motives against a larger principle. Alone with the bell, Dora sees that her plan may lead outsiders to ridicule the community. She realizes that the bell embodies something larger than her own wishes: "She had thought to be its master and make it her plaything, but now it was mastering her and would have its will" (p. 249 [267]). The moment when Dora hurls herself against the bell, summoning the community and undoing her scheme, marks an epoch in her moral growth.

Scenes like this one, in which we see a character think and change, give The Bell its emotional depth. Besides Dora, Michael is the character who changes most in the course of the novel. Michael is necessarily conflicted, as he seeks to reconcile his desire to be a priest with his attraction to young men; unlike James, the self-made religious social activist, Michael cannot see the world in morally absolute terms. Believing that "his religion and his passions sprang from the same source" (p. 94 [105]), he wonders whether this undermines his religion or purifies his passions. When Michael compares his own sermon, a "commendation of the second best act" (p. 190 [205]) when it is what a person's spiritual capacity allows, to James's demand that everyone do "the best thing" (p. 120 [132]) in all cases, he fears his sense of moral complexity is a weakness. Michael's past relationship with Nick and his transgression with Toby make him painfully aware of how easy it is to do harm without intending it. As the narrator remarks soon after Michael has kissed Toby, "Our actions are like ships which we may watch set out to sea, and not know when or with what cargo they will return to port" (p. 151 [165]). Fittingly, the novel's final chapters reveal the consequences of many of the characters' actions.

In The Bell, Murdoch enjoins something of the novelist's art on us all, urging us to imagine others' stories. The defining moral moments in Murdoch's fiction are those in which characters imaginatively change places. Thus, after Michael kisses Toby, he sees "that he had damaged somebody other than himself. He pictured Toby's reactions: the shock, the disgust, the disillusionment, the sense of something irretrievably spoilt" (p. 151 [165]). Toby's own moral growth begins in the aftermath of the kiss, as he passes from fury to considering Michael as a person: "He began really to envisage Michael. What was it like to be Michael? What was Michael thinking now?" (p. 148 [162]). Murdoch leaves us to weigh the respective claims of moral absolutes and human frailty, but allows no doubt about the obligation to consider others as fully as ourselves.

Discussion Questions

1. When Dora learns that Catherine plans to enter the Abbey as a nun, why does she feel "as if something within herself were menaced with destruction" (p. 63 [73])?

2. Why does James believe that "the study of personality, indeed the whole conception of personality, is . . . dangerous to goodness" (p. 119 [131])

3. Why does Michael kiss Toby?

4. Why does Noel passionately insist that Dora must not let the people at Imber Court give her "a bad conscience" (p. 170 [185])?

5. Why does seeing the pictures in the National Gallery make it obvious to Dora that she must go back to Imber Court immediately? [last two pages of Chapter 14]

6. Why does Dora believe that secretly substituting the old bell for the new one will be "a magical act of shattering significance, a sort of rite of power and liberation" (p. 196 [211])?

7. Why is Michael determined not to confess his relations with Toby to the Abbess?

8. Is Nick's sermon to Toby motivated by concern for Toby or revenge against Michael?

9. Why does Nick kill himself?

10. According to the novel, who or what is responsible for Catherine's madness and attempted suicide?

11. Why does Dora tear up the letters Paul gives to her?

For Further Reflection

1. Is it more important to have a clear vision of moral absolutes or an understanding of human complexity?

2. Do you agree with Michael that spiritual aspiration and passions often spring from the same source? Is it possible to fully satisfy both?

3. What is the value of a "fugitive and cloistered virtue" (p. 123 [135]) based on innocence rather than experience?

About Iris Murdoch

Born in Dublin in 1919, Iris Murdoch grew up in London. An only child, Murdoch described her father, who discussed books with her from her early childhood, as "the greatest influence in my life." She recalled Treasure Island, Kim, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and Through the Looking-Glass as the first books she enjoyed. She showed an interest in and facility for languages and learned Latin and Greek. She was educated at Somerville College, Oxford, where she read classics, ancient history, and philosophy. After graduating in 1942, Murdoch worked for the wartime British Treasury. In 1944, she took a position with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association, working with refugees and displaced persons in Belgium and Austria. Murdoch joined the faculty of St. Anne's College, Oxford in 1948, where she taught philosophy until 1963. She married fellow Oxford instructor and writer John Bayley in 1956.

Murdoch's first novel, Under the Net, appeared in 1954. It was followed by twenty-five more, of which The Bell (1958), The Nice and the Good (1968), The Black Prince (1973), and The Sea, The Sea (which won the Booker Prize in 1978) are some of the most celebrated. In addition to novels, she published poetry, plays, and works of philosophy, including Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1992), the clearest summation of her own convictions. During her lifetime she was recognized as one of Britain's major novelists, uniquely able to combine realism and myth in narratives that commented upon the times. She was made a Dame Commander in the Order of the British Empire in 1987 and died in 1999. That same year, her husband published Elegy for Iris, a memoir that included her battle with Alzheimer's disease.
[There is more biographical info about Murdoch below in the guide for The Sea, the Sea.]

Related Titles

Umberto Eco, The Name of the Rose (1980)
Set in a fourteenth-century Italian monastery where Brother William of Baskerville is investigating the murders of seven monks, this novel is both a mystery and a sophisticated exploration of the truths of faith and science.

Rumer Godden, In This House of Brede (1969)
When Philippa Talbot, a successful forty-year-old London businesswoman, decides to enter Brede Abbey as a postulant, she must confront tensions in both the convent and herself.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Blithedale Romance (1852)
The fictional Blithedale is based on Brook Farm, the experimental transcendentalist community Hawthorne briefly joined. The novel shows the unraveling of this idealistic commune by intrigue, impracticality, and passion.

Anthony Trollope, Barchester Towers (1857)
Political maneuvering within the Anglican Church is the focus of this large-scale novel, in which the powerful Mrs. Proudie, wife of the Bishop of Barchester, wages covert but determined warfare against the upstart chaplain Mr. Slope.

Joanna Trollope, The Choir (1978)
When the roof of Aldminster Cathedral needs costly repairs, the town is divided between those determined to save the famous boys' choir and those who want to eliminate it—a situation exacerbated by a range of romantic and family complications.

Discussion guide for The Sea, the Sea by Iris Murdoch

http://www.penguinputnam.com/static/rguides/us/sea_the_sea.html

INTRODUCTION

> "We are all such shocking poseurs, so
> good at inflating the importance of what we think
> we value."—Iris Murdoch, The Sea, The Sea

Around this barb of (unheeded) reflection swirls the rich maelstrom of fantasies, plots, delusions, mind games, and awakenings that makes up Iris Murdoch's popular 1978 Booker Prize-winning novel, The Sea, The Sea. As both a philosopher and a novelist, Murdoch always concerned herself in some way or another with the struggle to develop moral goodness and the concomitant effort to vanquish obsessive self-regard. In The Sea, The Sea, she dramatizes this characteristic moral concern to great effect on a stage crowded with self-absorbed artistic Londoners out of their element in a small seaside village.
As she explores the potent mixture of power, illusion, and self-delusion in retired actor, playwright, and theater director Charles Arrowby, Murdoch weaves a rich tapestry of startling events: old love affairs revive and die again, friendships sour into attempted murder, hallucinations (or are they?) portend ominous happenings, and the drowning embrace of the sea waits restlessly in the background. As Charles negotiates the turbulent swirl of events, an intricate portrait develops of a man bewitched and bewildered by his own powers of self-promotion and manipulation.

In an imaginative style at once realist and gothic, modern yet hearkening back to the age of the grand novel, The Sea, The Sea charts a person's journey toward becoming a virtuous, spiritually mature human being. Taking up the moral development of the individual in a novel rather than a philosophical tract might strike some as a hazardous project, one that could mar both the clarity of thought so necessary for good philosophy and the narrative enchantment so integral to a good novel. And yet it was precisely in her novels that Murdoch so successfully discussed the vital issues of the moral life. Despite this marriage of philosophy and fiction-writing that is so prominent in her work, she always resisted the label of "philosophical novelist," refuting any suggestion that her books might be merely anemic shufflings of philosophical positions by consistently delivering vibrant characters and powerfully effective plots in the realist tradition of such great nineteenth-century novelists as Dostoevsky and George Eliot. The Sea, The Sea is no exception in either the profound issues with which it grapples or in the richness of its fictional world.

By the time she came to write The Sea, The Sea, Murdoch had already published eighteen novels and several times been short-listed for the Booker Prize. Concentrating her well-honed talents on the tenacious demon of egotism, The Sea, The Sea lays out an absorbing world of magic, illusion, and power—supernatural as well as theatrical, spiritual as well as worldly. Charles, in turning his back on the dazzling world of theater and retreating to a house by the sea to take stock of himself, write his memoir, and make a lasting testament, believes that he is eschewing the vulgar, self-absorbed power plays that constituted his adult life as a director. He believes that he is learning to be good. But self-regard and the manipulation of others are not so easily dispensed with. His egotism follows him—as do the many people that he has pulled under his spell over the years, such as his ex-lover Rosina, the ferociously glamorous actress whom he stole from Peregrine (her husband and one of Charles's friends); the mysterious Buddhist cousin, James, who for years served as the linchpin for the elaborate network of envy that Charles carried with him from childhood into adulthood; and Lizzie, another actress and ex-lover whom Charles found "surprisingly easy to leave...when the time came." Each steps into Murdoch's dizzying and humorous narrative with a segment of Charles's past, revealing him to have been a self-absorbed manipulator ignorant of his own motivations.

Echoing the prominent place that romantic love and sexual obsession often play in Murdoch's novels, the greatest obstacle to the self-understanding and maturity that Charles so falteringly strives for proves to be his accidental meeting with his first love, Hartley, who, after her abrupt cessation of their chaste yet intoxicating relationship, became a rather ordinary housewife. Contrasting the thoughts and motivations of Hartley and her all-too-banally brutal husband Ben with those of Charles and his many neurotic visitors, the novel descends into a whirlpool of opposing wills and thwarted stratagems. With a morbid fascination brought about by Murdoch's nimble control of this cast of idiosyncratic characters, we watch as serene reflection eludes Charles and he desperately grasps at the unrealistic phantoms spawned by the long lost object of his unconsummated childhood infatuation—leaving many victims in his wake. Throughout the novel, theatrical illusion, Tibetan magic, unconscious projections, supernatural interventions, and overripe fantasies all skew clear perception, distorting the characters' awareness of events and entangling them in a confused web of self-centered power relations, even as they try to be virtuous.

In intricately charting the multifaceted deceptions of Charles Arrowby with stunningly subtle black humor, Murdoch adeptly elaborates on a motif that followed her in her lifelong concern with Good, with Love, and with Freedom: to be good one must transform the personal into the impersonal, one must escape one's private self and concern oneself with others. Inspired by Shakespeare's The Tempest and echoing Prospero's attempt to transform magic into spirit, The Sea, The Sea brilliantly depicts the risks and self-deceptions of the

spiritual life, the precarious and important distinction between imagination and fantasy, and the vital importance of negotiating these dangers.

ABOUT IRIS MURDOCH

Iris Murdoch (1919-1999) was one of the most acclaimed British writers of the twentieth century. Very prolific, she wrote twenty-six novels, four books of philosophy, five plays, a volume of poetry, a libretto, and numerous essays before developing Alzheimer's disease in the mid-1990s. Her novels have won many prizes: the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for The Black Prince, the Whitbread Literary Award for Fiction for The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, and the Booker Prize for The Sea, The Sea. She herself was also the recipient of many esteemed awards: Dame of the Order of the British Empire, the Royal Society of Literature's Companion of Literature award, and the National Arts Club's (New York) Medal of Honor for Literature.

She was born in Dublin, Ireland, on July 15, 1919, the only child of Anglo-Irish parents. Her father was a bookish civil servant who had served as a cavalry officer during World War I; her mother had trained as an opera singer before marrying. The love of both literature and music instilled in her by her parents proved to be powerful formative influences, and she reportedly began writing at the age of nine. The family moved to London in Iris's childhood and she grew up in the western suburbs of Hammersmith and Chiswich. The 1940s saw Iris receive a first-class degree in classics from Oxford, briefly become a member of the Communist Party (from which she resigned in disappointment), work in Belgian an Austrian refugee camps for the United Nations Rehabilitation and Relief Program, and befriend Jean-Paul Sartre, on whom she wrote what was to be her first published work, a critical study entitled Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953). In 1947 she took up a postgraduate studentship at Cambridge, studying philosophy under none other than Ludwig Wittgenstein. The fruits of these philosophical encounters went on to form an important part of her fertile talent as a novelist.

With three previous novels unpublished, Murdoch made her fiction-writing debut in 1954. Under the Net is a picaresque existentialist adventure set in London and Paris's Left Bank that displays many of the traits for which her later work is so admired: a fast-paced plot, finely wrought settings, imaginatively developed characters, and a strong philosophical concern with moral issues and ethical crises. Surpassing the somewhat derivative existentialist strictures of this nevertheless stunning debut, Murdoch published almost a novel per year throughout the 1950s, '60s, and '70s and continued at a slightly less feverish pace throughout the '80s and early '90s. With each book, she displayed her unique talent for combining a lively, comic touch in characterization and plot with a serious concern for such profound themes as the nature of goodness and human freedom. A novelist and philosopher rolled into one, Iris Murdoch declared in her famous essay "Against Dryness" (1961) that literature "has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy." However, she never allowed her novels or her characters to become abstract stand-ins for philosophical viewpoints, asserting in the same essay that the novel should be "a fit house for free characters to live in."

Producing romances such as The Sandcastle (1957), religious fables such as The Bell (1958), and fantasies such as The Unicorn (1963), she ranged widely across genres and settings. A Severed Head (1961)—later made into both a play and a film—takes on Jungian archetypes and Freud's theories about masculine sexuality, while in The Red and the Green (1965), Murdoch, in her only foray into historical fiction, delved into the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. Her calling cards became the intoxicating combination of love, marriage, adultery, sexuality, and religion, as well as the inventive use of gothic elements. In The Time of Angels (1966), for instance, the protagonist is an atheist Anglican priest in an

impoverished inner-city parish who engages in black magic—and through whom Murdoch explored the central question of the role of morality after the death of God.

From the 1970s into the 1990s, international acclaim and recognition coincided with the publication of some of her finest work, including an experimental novel of love gone mad, The Black Prince (1973), her popular and highly esteemed The Sea, The Sea (1978), and a Platonic investigation of morality, Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (1992), one of her most acclaimed nonfiction writings. Her last novel, Jackson's Dilemma (1995), was published just as Alzheimer's began to take its toll. She died in Oxford on February 8, 1999, survived by her husband, John Bayley.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for Iris Murdoch's The Sea, the Sea

1. Charles's house, Shruff End, is in many ways a character in its own right. Intricately described, the house is explicitly referred to as gloomy and cave-like and can in many ways stand as a metaphor for Charles's own mind. What are some of the ways that events and features in Shruff End indicate Charles's mental state? Discuss his evocation of Plato's myth of the cave and fascination with Minn's Cauldron. What other examples and uses of the trope of the cave punctuate the novel?

2. In a moment of drunken philosophical reverie, James renders the following soliloquy:

"Religion is power, it has to be, the power for instance to change oneself, even to destroy oneself. But that is also its bane. The exercise of power is a dangerous delight. . . . The worshipper endows the worshipped object with power, real power not imaginary power. . . . But this power is dreadful stuff. Our lusts and attachments compose our god. And when one attachment is cast off another arises by way of consolation. We never give up a pleasure absolutely, we only barter it for another. All spirituality tends to degenerate into magic, and the use of magic has an automatic nemesis even when the mind has been purified of grosser habits. White magic is black magic. And a less than perfect meddling in the spiritual world can breed monsters for other people. Demons used for good can hang around and make mischief afterwards. The last achievement is the absolute surrender of magic itself, the end of what you call superstition. Yet how does it happen? Goodness is giving up power and acting upon the world negatively. The good are unimaginable."

Contrast this description of magic and the concept of goodness with Charles's stated intention at the beginning of the novel to "abjure magic and. . . learn to be good."

3. Speaking of "some fear of loneliness and death that comes to me out of the sea," Charles observes that "the sea ages one," yet he continually presents it as an object of aesthetic appreciation. Contrast Charles's rich, painterly descriptions of the sea in his writing with the role it plays in the "real world" that the novel presents. How are both the plot and the characters' thoughts organized by and centered on the figure of the sea?

4. Compare the three female characters—the mundane and muddled Hartley, the demure and clinging Lizzie, and the fierce and implacable Rosina—in their attitudes toward love and their approaches to Charles. Are any of them free? Do they seek freedom? Compare

Murdoch's depiction of them with her handling of the male characters. Is sexual difference and "the nature of women" a theme in the book?

5. Charles repeatedly and self-consciously draws attention to the diary/ memoir format of his writing, contrasting it to his previous writings, which were "written in water." In fact his withdrawing to Shruff End to write his memoir provides the very foundation and center of everything that happens in the novel. How does Murdoch use the natural self-absorption of this medium to render a view of Charles that he himself does not have access to? What are other examples of his self-absorption?

6. The specter of demons, fates, and controlling forces are sprinkled throughout the novel. What are some of the examples of these "relentless mechanisms"? What is their significance? Is The Sea, The Sea a fatalistic novel? What examples might counter this assertion?

7. What is the significance of Titian's Perseus and Andromeda in the novel? How do the painting's figures relate to specific sets of characters, for instance, Hartley, Ben, and Charles, or Peregrine, Charles, and Rosina? Discuss the sea monster and its role in the painting and the novel, taking into consideration both its phallic and vaginal manifestations.

8. Life, Charles says, unlike art, "has an irritating way of bumping and limping on, undoing conversions, casting doubts on solutions, and generally illustrating the impossibility of living happily or virtuously ever after." What conversions are undone, what solutions cast in doubt in the novel? By the end of the novel, has Charles learned anything through his experiences? Is he—or are any of the other characters—happier or more virtuous at the end of the novel than at the beginning? If so, in what way? If not, how has he failed?

9. How does one reconcile Charles's passionate yearning for Hartley with his appraisal of the married state as "that unimaginable condition of intimacy and mutual bondage"? In light of the fact that love and its reclamation, romantic histories, jealousy, and sexual obsession figure so prominently in the novel, is there an example of a happy couple in The Sea, The Sea or are all fated to be, in some sense or another, trapped in "the inferno of marriage"?

10. Echoing the frequent occurrence in modernist fiction of the male hero on a quest, Murdoch often utilizes a central male narrator in her novels—a device that prompts some to accuse her of trying to "write like a man." In The Sea, The Sea, how does she maintain a distance from her male narrator? What elements of Charles's circuitous intellectual journalizing does Murdoch employ to undermine his narrative position? Discuss some of the many examples of Charles's unreliability as a narrator, especially those involving the disparity between his stated intentions and what he actually delivers.

11. James is very prominent in both Charles's memories and in the plot, taking on many roles in Charles's mind: spoiled cousin, latent homosexual, Buddhist mystic, patronizing connoisseur, retired general, magical savior, romantic rival, moral conscience, reader of the book of Nature. In light of this plethora of identities, what effect does James have on Charles's own identity? Can James be considered the "guiding angel" of The Sea, The Sea? Why or why not?

Questions for Iris Murdoch's first novel, **Under the Net**:

1. From Grolier's Electronic Encyclopedia:
"The English writer Iris Jean Murdoch, b. July 15, 1919, is one of the most prolific and popular novelists in the English language. She taught modern philosophy at Oxford University from 1948 to 1963, and her philosophical knowledge is often reflected in her intricate, comic plots. Her first book (1953) was a study of Jean Paul Sartre, but her first novel, Under the Net (1954), is sometimes regarded as an implicit rejection of existentialism. "
In what ways does "Under the Net" reject existentialism?

2. In Chapter 4, Jake says "my acquaintance with Hugo is the central theme of this book." Is it? Or is this another example of Jake being wrong about a lot of things in the beginning of the book?

3. Does Hugo represent Wittgenstein in this novel? Look at some of the dialogue between Annandine (Hugo) and Tamarus (Jake) from Jake's novel "The Silencer", particularly in Chapter 6 where Annandine says:
"For most of us, for almost all of us, truth can be attained, if at all, only in silence."
Look at the contention in Chapter 17 that intellectual work is not enough, that you need to work in the real world (elementary schools/hospitals...).

4. To get "under the net" is to explain with a theory. Why did Murdoch give her novel that title?

5. What frees Jake at the end to allow him to go back to writing novels? Jake is supposedly in a search for truth. Does he find it? How?

6. Is Jake a wandering hero in the mold of Tom Jones? Is social satire a major goal of Murdoch's? Is there more social satire in "Under the Net" than in "The Sea, the Sea"?

7. Why does Lefty always seem to be following chaos around and benefitting from it? Are his socialist views sincere or just a way for him to cause chaos that he will profit from?

8. If Finn is so important to Jake, why didn't Jake try to track him down instead of Hugo, especially when Jake was worried that Finn might even be dead? What does Finn represent in the novel?

9. What do you make of the love square? (Jake loves Anna. Anna loves Hugo. Hugo loves Sadie. Sadie loves Jake.)