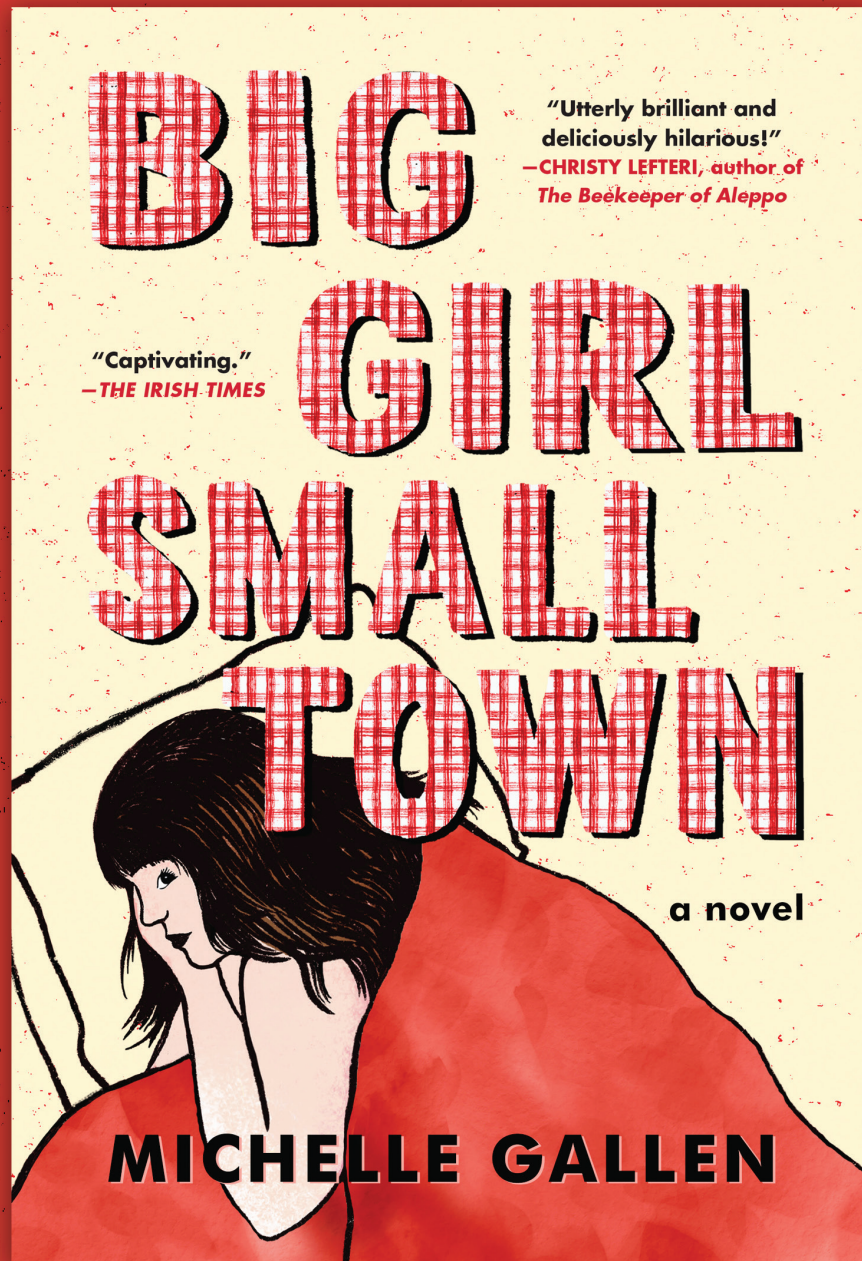




BOOK CLUB KIT



RESOURCES INSIDE:

Questions for Discussion • An Essay by the Author • A Glossary of Irish Slang



WOULD YOU LIKE TO HOST MICHELLE GALLEN AT YOUR BOOK CLUB?

Michelle is offering to virtually visit book groups of 6 or more who read her novel before July 2021. She can join your group for up to thirty minutes. To arrange a session, please visit the Contact tab on michellegallen.com.

Questions for Discussion

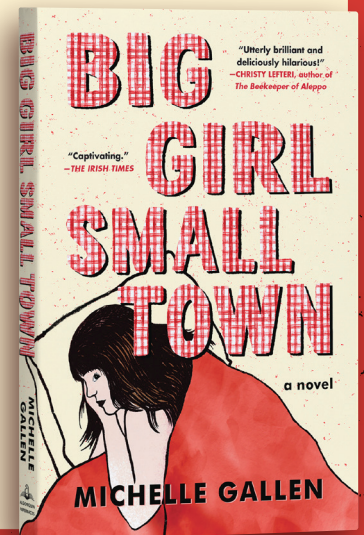
BIG GIRL SMALL TOWN

by **MICHELLE GALLEN**

1. Did you identify with any of the items on Majella's lists? Why is her list of things she hates much longer than the list of things she loves?
2. Majella lives a very frugal, circumscribed life. How do you think money could change things for her?
3. Majella could be described as "low maintenance." Despite her relaxed approach to beauty, fashion, and hygiene, she has a healthy sex life. What do you think are the factors at play here?
4. Majella repeatedly watches a boxed set of the '80s soap opera *Dallas*, and fondly remembers watching the series as a child with her father. Why do you think Majella is obsessed with *Dallas*? If you could introduce Majella to a new TV series, what would you recommend for her?
5. Majella is a "big girl." She likes how she looks; she likes being strong. In some ways, her size makes her invisible to certain people. What are the advantages of being a big girl in a small town? What are the disadvantages?
6. Majella spends most of her waking hours with Marty, her married co-worker. She has had sex with him on the premises of A Salt & Battered for almost a decade, yet never sees him socially. Majella seems to view Marty as just a colleague. How do you think Marty feels about Majella?
7. How do you think Majella's undiagnosed autism affects her life and her interactions with other people? Do you think a diagnosis of autism and professional support might benefit her? How might her relationship with her mother change with a diagnosis?
8. Imagine you live in Aghybogey and have befriended Majella. What advice would you give her on changing her life for the better? Do you think

Majella would be open to your advice?

9. "The Disappeared" is a term that describes people who are believed to have been abducted, murdered, and secretly buried in Ireland, mostly during the Troubles. Majella's father is described as having "disappeared." What do you think happened to him? What do you think the impact of his disappearance has been on his family?
10. How do you think Brexit would affect the characters in this novel? What about the reintroduction of a "hard" border, with checkpoints, watchtowers, and the forced closure of local roads?
11. The Catholic church plays a prominent role in the novel. It's unclear if Majella believes in God or not. Do you think the Catholic church helps the novel's characters, or hinders them?
12. Aghybogey is a town starkly divided between Catholics and Protestants—schools, churches, housing developments, and even shops are segregated. Majella notes that she has never tasted a "Protestant chip." Such deep segregation has come about by official policy and local will. What do you think is the impact of such divisions? Do they reduce the risk of violence or entrench opinions? Do you think divisions should be addressed? How would you change things for the better?
13. Who do you think assaulted Majella's grandmother? What do you think was the motive for the assault?
14. If you could hear the story from the perspective of another character, whom would you choose?



CHILD OF THE TROUBLES

an essay by

MICHELLE GALLEN



I grew up in a small town, as full of gossip and intrigue and love and hate as any small town anywhere in the world. But I was born in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, a few miles from the border between what I was told were the “Free” State and the “United” Kingdom. I attended school in what was then the most-bombed small town in Europe. My local district had the highest unemployment rate anywhere in the industrially developed world.

One of my earliest memories is of being driven to school after a bomb. I was about four years old, and I remember looking out the car window, shocked by the transformation of our scruffy wee town into a series of shattered shops and houses. The air was thick with the smell of smoke and dust. I looked up at a void where a three-story building once stood, struck by the way the light fell on my face now that the building no longer blocked the sun. From an early age, I had a terrible sense that things could change—suddenly and violently—in minutes.

Being born in Northern Ireland meant I was never part of Generation X. Instead, I was a Child of the Troubles. Iconic photos immortalized our parents protesting, resisting, and rioting. There were uniforms and balaclavas, murder scenes and flowers. I was a teenager before I realized how unusual it is to grow up with armed soldiers patrolling your streets and fields. Our community was under close British military surveillance—the detail on the confidential maps they drew of our local area even included the names of our dogs. We grew up watching the Brits watch us watch them, and then we watched ourselves on TV.

Despite this micro surveillance and the media reports on atrocities and TV programs exposing murders, collaboration, and arms dealing, it was clear to me that our community—our hopes and dreams, our struggles and our joys—was largely invisible to the rest of the world.

When the IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994, both Protestants and Catholics heaved a sigh of relief, though many of us, worn out by interminable violence

and broken promises, didn't really believe in peace. This ceasefire, however, was sold to us as the real deal. It wasn't going to be just another lull in the violent campaigns that had happened on and off since the partition of Ireland in 1922. And the ceasefire held, month after month, then year after year. The British Army disappeared from our streets; barricades, checkpoints, and watchtowers were dismantled; prisoners were released. The dead stayed dead, but a new generation of children dubbed the Ceasefire Babies grew up in relative peace and safety.

When I started writing this novel, the Ceasefire Babies were hurtling towards their teens while a relentlessly optimistic media continued to celebrate our so-called peace. But I'd seen the initial rush of hope and the appetite for change coagulate into a bubbling stew of sectarianism and violence that now wasn't quite bad enough to be newsworthy. I felt compelled to explore the festering wound of the border and the lasting impact of the Troubles in a manuscript that eventually became *Big Girl, Small Town*.

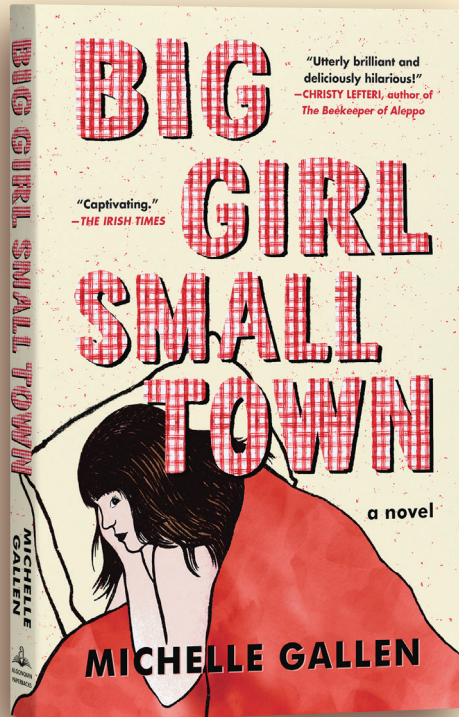
Majella, the protagonist, is an undiagnosed autistic woman with low support needs. She is both an intimate local and perpetual outsider, and the reader is invited to see the deeply divided town of Aghybogey through her eyes. Majella finds purpose and stability working in the local chip shop, where the perfect social interaction can be reduced to "What can ah get chew?" and "Comin' up." Majella feels different from "Other People," but she doesn't know she is autistic. Though characters in the book write Majella off as odd, her dispassionate analysis of them and past events allowed me to highlight the oddities and hypocrisies of their small town, giving readers a shortcut into the heart of post-conflict Northern Ireland.

I guess I identify with oddball narrators because I'm not neurotypical. A brain injury in my early twenties left me with a range of deficits that mean I experience many of the sensory issues that challenge Majella: I cannot filter lights, sounds, and smells. I can become overwhelmed in busy environments. My brain has no off switch—I'm wide open to the tiniest and most beautiful or repulsive details in my line of sight and get exhausted processing everything. I struggle to understand office politics and some social interactions. Though I try hard to fit in, I've been told over and over that I am too honest, too forthright, too much.

Interestingly, some medical professionals have noted that I was probably never neurotypical. I had a photographic memory as a child and memorized library

books so that I could read them in my head after they were returned. I preferred to escape into the fields around our house rather than play with other kids, because social interaction was tiring and often confusing. I preferred to learn about humans from books.

All these experiences have fueled my writing. *Big Girl, Small Town* is not like the books and films I grew up with. There is no role for Liam Neeson leading a band of men in balaclavas. The male members of Majella's family might be directly involved in violent political acts, but this is Majella's story. In the end, I wanted to explore how the Troubles—and "peace"—were experienced by girls and women, and to reveal their humor, grief, and resilience.



A Glossary of Irish Slang

BIG GIRL SMALL TOWN

To hear an audio version of this glossary, please visit michellegallen.com/glossary.

- ACH** ● an exclamation often used at the start of a sentence to express empathy, unhappiness, sympathy, disappointment, etc.
- AGHYBOGEY** ● (place-name) a fictional village in rural Northern Ireland (from the Irish *Achadh Bogaigh*, meaning “boggy/swampy field”)
- AH** ● I
- AH'M** ● I'm
- ALKIE** ● slang for alcoholic or binge drinker
- ANN** ● and
- ANNA** ● and a
- ARSE** ● buttocks or irritating person
- AYE** ● yes
- BABBY** ● baby (plural: babbies)
- BASTE** ● Literal meaning is beast. Hate-ful, loathsome, scary thing or person: “That was a baste of a day” refers to a bad day at work. Used at times as a strong condemnation or insult for a person.
- BATE** ● beat or beaten. Also means to hurriedly complete an action: “I bate my lunch into me as I was due on a conference call at 12:45.”
- BBC** ● British Broadcasting Corporation—British national public broadcasting service
- BLETHER** ● mindless talking, often a near monologue
- BOGGER** ● insulting name for a person from the country
- BOGGING** ● dirty, filthy
- CLONBOGEY** ● (place-name) a fictional town (from the Irish *Cluin Bogaigh*, meaning “swampy meadow”)
- COUL** ● cold, feeling cold, extreme low temperatures, the common cold
- COWPED** ● toppled over
- CRAIC** ● great fun, the latest news, the status of any subject
- CROIL** ● a very small person, a runt, a stunted fruit or vegetable
- CUB** ● young man or small boy
- CUDDY** ● a young woman or small girl (plural: cuddies)
- CUZ** ● because
- DANDER** ● a gentle stroll
- DIDDIES** ● breasts
- DIRNING** ● droning on
- DOING** ● a physical assault or a traditional prank before a wedding, where the bride or groom (or both) are tied up in the back of a pickup or trailer, covered in the contents of the kitchen garbage, and driven around their local area
- DRYSHITE** ● someone who is zero craic, or a bit of a pain to get rid of
- DUNREE** ● (place-name) a neighborhood in County Donegal, Ireland, where Fort Dunree is located (from the Irish *An Dún Riabhach*, meaning “gray fort”)
- EEJIT** ● intellectual inferior; person who gets on your nerves
- FAG** ● cigarette
- FÁILTE** ● Irish for welcome
- FANNY** ● female genitalia (not buttocks)
- FOOTER** ● to fiddle with; “footery” is something small and fiddly that requires time and patience to tackle.

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- FREE STATE** ● The Irish Free State was founded in 1922 with 26 of Ireland's 32 counties. Though Ireland officially became the Republic of Ireland in 1948, the term "Free State" is still used informally by some rural nationalists.
- FRIG** ● a mild expletive used to express disbelief, surprise, or shock
- FRIG-ALL** ● not much, nothing
- FRIGGER** ● insult applied to an irritating person
- FUT** ● foot
- GAA** ● Gaelic Athletic Association—the governing body of Irish hurling and Gaelic football
- GARVAGHY** ● (place-name) a fictional town in rural Northern Ireland (from the Irish *Garbhachadh*, meaning "rough field")
- GAWK** ● (verb) to look intensely (often open-mouthed) (noun) an ungainly male
- GLEEK** ● a quick, covert glance
- GOB** ● mouth
- GOBSHITE** ● insult leveled at a know-it-all or an irritating person
- GULDER** ● to roar, shout
- GUMPTION** ● initiative, intelligence, common sense
- GURNING** ● crying or complaining
- G'WAN** ● go on
- FELLA** ● fellow, man, chap
- FOUNDERED** ● feeling very cold, almost hypothermic
- HALLION** ● a large, uncouth male who is often up to no good
- INTERNMENT** ● refers to the British Army's mass arrest and imprisonment without trial of 342 people suspected of being involved with the IRA
- HOKE** ● to rummage or search for something by going through objects
- HOOR** ● whore (pronounced who-err)
- HOORING** ● can mean rushing around, driving fast, or the act of prostitution
- KILT** ● killed or in extremis (e.g., overworked, in pain, under pressure)
- LAMPED** ● the condition of being drunk or having been punched
- LANGERED** ● very drunk
- LEGGARED** ● heavily applied, often used to describe layering something on top of something else (e.g., butter on bread)
- LOCK** ● a small amount (more than a couple, but less than a wheen)
- LONG KESH** ● a colloquial name for Her Majesty's Prison Maze, a prison in Northern Ireland used to house paramilitary prisoners during the Troubles
- MANK** ● muck, dirt, filth
- MEENKEERAGH** ● (place-name) a town in County Donegal, Ireland (from the Irish *Mín na gcaorach*, meaning "mountain pasture of the sheep")
- MONTH'S MIND** ● a requiem mass held one month after someone's death
- MUSTA** ● must have

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- NHS** ● National Health Service, the British government's public healthcare system
- NYAMMEN** ● whining; crying in a self-pitying, attention-seeking way; long-winded expression of displeasure at a person or situation; a young kitten's cry
- ON THE LOCK** ● getting drunk in a public place
- ON THE TEAR** ● getting drunk in a series of places, both public and private
- OXTER** ● armpit
- PISH** ● (noun) urine
(verb) urinating or raining heavily
- PROD** ● insulting abbreviation for Protestant often used by Catholic nationalists
- THE RAH** ● the Irish Republican Army
- REDD UP** ● to tidy up
- REDDENER** ● blush
- REEK** ● (verb) emitting smoke; (noun) pungent odor
- RIFT** ● burp or belch
- RTÉ** ● Raidió Teilifís Éireann—Irish national public broadcasting service
- SCART** ● to dodge or make a quick pass around something
- SETTEE** ● sofa, couch
- SHEUGH** ● drainage ditch at the edge of a field, often full of rainwater
- SINN FEIN** ● an Irish republican political party active in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland
- SKITTER** ● diarrhea, an annoying person or animal, a youth
- SNOOTERY** ● snobby, posh
- STEAMING** ● drunk
- STOCIOUS** ● drunk
- TAE** ● (preposition) to; (noun) tea
- TAIG** ● an ethnic slur used by some Protestant loyalists to refer to Catholic nationalists. It has been appropriated by some Catholics to self-describe.
- THOLE** ● put up with, endure
- THON** ● that object or person over there
- TIL** ● to
- TILL** ● until
- UTV** ● Ulster Television—Northern Irish TV channel
- WAN** ● one
- WEAN** ● child (a corruption of “wee one”)
- WEE** ● small
- WEEMEN** ● women
- WELL OILED** ● describes the condition of someone who is feeling the effects of having consumed a large amount of alcohol
- WILE** ● (adverb) very, extremely (e.g., I'm wile tired)
(adjective) terrible, shocking (e.g., Isn't it wile about climate change?)
- WHATTER** ● water
- WOULDNTA** ● would not have
- WRECKED** ● tired or drunk (depending on the context)
- YE** ● you
- YER** ● your

