



The Son of a Certain Woman by Wayne Johnston

About the author:

Wayne Johnston was born and raised in Goulds, Newfoundland. After a brief stint in pre-Med, Wayne obtained a BA in English from Memorial University. He worked as a reporter for the St. John's Daily News before deciding to devote himself full-time to writing.

Source: Author's website (<http://waynejohnston.ca>)

About this book:

Stephen Leacock Award Finalist – 2014, Scotiabank Giller Prize Nominee – 2013.

From one of Canada's most acclaimed, beloved storytellers: *The Son of a Certain Woman* is Wayne Johnston's funniest, sexiest novel yet, controversial in its issues, wise, generous and then some in its depiction of humanity.

Percy Joyce, born in St. John's, Newfoundland, in the fifties is an outsider from childhood, set apart by a congenital disfigurement. Taunted and bullied, he is also isolated by his intelligence and wit, and his unique circumstances: an unbaptized boy raised by a single mother in a fiercely Catholic society. Soon on the cusp of teenagehood, Percy is filled with yearning, wild with hormones, and longing for what he can't have—wanting to be let in...and let out. At the top of his wish list is his disturbingly alluring mother, Penelope, whose sex appeal fairly leaps off the page. Everyone in St. John's lusts after her—including her sister-in-law, Medina; their paying boarder, the local chemistry teacher, Pops MacDougal; and...Percy.

The Son of a Certain Woman brilliantly mixes sorrow and laughter as it builds toward an unforgettable ending. Will Pops marry Penelope? Will Penelope and Medina be found out? Will Percy be lured into the Church? It is a reminder of the pain of being an

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outsider; of the sustaining power of love and the destructive power of hate; and of the human will to triumph.

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. The novel, told from Percy's perspective, has him looking back and giving a detailed account of his early life. From the opening paragraph we are made aware that he is telling his story through the lens of memory, yet we gain no clear insight into where Percy might be "now" or what action unfolds after the novel's closing scene. How old do you think Percy the narrator is, and what events do you think have occurred in the intervening time?
2. Percy often asks himself if he would have fallen in love with his mother if she weren't so supernaturally attractive. Knowing what you do about Percy, how would you answer this question? Are Percy's feelings for his mother simply the result of her powers of seduction, or is there more at play?
3. The novel depicts a deeply repressed community in the throes of sexual hysteria, and this sense of social panic is a driving force for many of the story's main events. How do characters like Penelope, Medina, Brother McHugh, Francine, and Sister Mary Aggie reflect and/or critique this hysteria?
4. Although we can roughly infer the time period from the description of the city and its social structures, Johnston has created a setting that seems to exist, in a sense, outside of space and time, with few concrete details to ground the story in historical reality. Why do you think Johnston made this choice and how does it affect your experience of the novel?
5. Penelope, a self-described autodidact, devours books and possesses all sorts of arcane knowledge whereas Medina can't read or write, though she prides herself on her street smarts. How does this pair's personal struggle with knowledge vs.



ignorance play out, in their relationship and in relation to the book's broader themes?

6. Why do you think Percy becomes so attached to the three Mass cards that Sister Mary Aggie gives him early in the novel? What role does Sister Mary Aggie play, both in the trajectory of Percy's life and in the novel as a whole?

7. As soon as he begins going to school and is no longer sheltered from the outside world, Percy falls into the habit of telling ever-more-outlandish untruths about himself and his family. Yet he makes no attempt at consistency in his stories, which he refers to not as lies but as myths, most famously in his catchphrase, "Give me myth or give me death." Is myth the same as untruth? If not, what's the difference? How do myth and untruth relate to one another, and why does Percy choose to see his tall tales not as lying but as mythologizing?

8. Names take on a great deal of significance in Johnston's universe — Percy is named for the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Penelope bears the name of the long-suffering mythical heroine of *The Odyssey*, who for twenty years awaits the return of her husband. McHugh, says Percy, does not seem like a "Gus"; but he is in fact "Augustine" — "a hard name to live up to," muses Percy (p. 96). In what other ways do the names of characters and/or places in the book tell us more about them, or warn us of their fates?

9. The concept of being marked — marked by birth, marked by circumstance, marked by fate, marked by sin — pervades the novel. While Percy's physical stains are the most direct example of this, each character struggles with these "marks" in their own way. What are some examples of this?

10. The fictionalized St. John's neighborhood of the Mount, with its clear-cut landmarks and imposing presence, functions as a kind of theatrical backdrop for a story that the characters seem to play out as if they are actors on a stage. What are some of the ways in which the novel's characters perform like actors, both explicitly and more subtly?



11. Throughout the book, there is a pervasive sense of things being out of scale, wrongly sized, or disproportionate: Percy's oversized hands, feet, and lower lip, the towering Mount with its enormous basilica, and even the oversized, beer-swollen Vat Rats that infest the town. How does this sense of imbalance reflect the inner worlds of the characters?

12. "The Archbishop says your life stories are like parables," Brother McHugh tells Percy in the days leading up to Penelope and Pops's wedding and Percy's baptism (p. 342). How does the Church's view of Penny and Percy's "story" differ from their own version? What does the book tell us about the power of storytelling?

13. Johnston uses humour in a variety of ways: one of these is the fact that the characters, both children and adults, often speak in jokes, puns, or practised rhymes full of wordplay and sharp social commentary. Often, the complexity of the humour in the characters' interactions makes Percy's narrative seem less based in reality, seeming to reflect Percy's unique voice more so than the way people actually talk. What purpose, then, do you think this humour and wordplay serve?

14. In an interview, Johnston said that one of his goals with the book was to make it "an example of the particular standing in for the universal." What strategies does he employ to this end? Is he successful at channeling the universal despite his characters' extreme uniqueness?

15. The concept of Fate pervades the novel, with much emphasis placed on the characters' assigned "roles" in life, roles they seem unable to escape regardless of the choices they make, like actors in a Greek tragedy. In what ways do the characters wrestle with Fate, and, in the end, do you believe they are victims of it?

16. How does the revelation of why Medina quit school, which comes late in the book, when Medina meets Sister Celestine at Brother Rice and confronts her about her past abuse, change your perspective on her character and motivations? Do her actions in the office seem out of character?



17. Long before Percy begrudgingly undergoes the official ritual of baptism at the climax of the book, the “Big Do at the Big B,” as it comes to be called, his life is steeped in ritual; domestic life at 44 Bonaventure is defined by its numerous rituals, both covert and overt, and once Percy witnesses the spectacle of Father Bill blessing the Joyce home at the Archbishop’s insistence, he takes things to a whole new level, culminating in the infamous bus-blessing incident. Although Percy is resistant to the Church, he is clearly very drawn to the power of ritual. Why do you think this is?

18. The Catholic Church looms large in the story, and thus so does the need for Percy to confess his sins. At the end of the novel he finally undergoes his first official Confession at the hands of the Archbishop, yet this confession is simply a restatement of the earlier apology he was forced to make by Brother McHugh, and it is clear that Percy is not approaching it with sincerity. Yet despite this refusal to capitulate to the Church’s strictures, Percy does seem to have some moments of pure confession. At what point do you think Percy is at his most honest, and what are the effects of this honesty?

19. The structure of the book is modeled on James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Johnston’s final scene mirrors what is known in Joyce’s novel as Molly Bloom’s soliloquy, a kind of stream-of-consciousness monologue of the thoughts of Leopold Bloom’s wife as she lays in bed next to him — a change in tone from the rest of the book, which has been narrated by its two male protagonists, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. The last words of *Ulysses* are “his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes,” which mirror Percy’s final “Yes, I thought, my heart going like mad. Yes, I will. I will, again. Yes. Yes.” Does the final chapter in Johnston’s book reflect a similar shift in tone? Did the book’s ending surprise you?

20. Although the history of Newfoundland takes a backseat in this novel, compared to some of Johnston’s other books, in a poignant passage Percy reflects on the story of Newfoundland’s rocky confederation with Canada after, on his fourteenth birthday walk, he comes upon a man in an anti-confederation T-shirt. For Newfoundlanders, says Percy, joining Canada against their will “must have been like



getting baptized without giving your consent”. In what ways does this sense of alienation seem to define the citizens of Newfoundland, and specifically St. John’s?

21. In giving us a detailed account of his various lies and exaggerations, as well as his deepest and darkest secrets, Percy gives us the impression that he is presenting the unexpurgated story of his life without leaving out any details. Yet we see for ourselves the levels of untruth or, more kindly, myth, that he is capable of. Given this contradiction, do you believe that Percy Joyce is a reliable narrator?

Source: Penguin Random House Canada (<http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

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