



Famine

Liam O'Flaherty

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Set in the period of the Great Famine of the 1840s, Famine is the story of three generations of the Kilmartin family. It is a masterly historical novel, rich in language, character, and plot--a panoramic story of passion, tragedy, and resilience.

Famine Details

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From Reader Review Famine for online ebook

Elizabeth says

Remember in Jane Eyre when Jane is terrified by Rochester's suggestion that she become a governess in Ireland (for Mrs. O'Gall of Bitternut Lodge)? And you wondered why a lovely place like Ireland was so scary? Wonder no more. Famine by Liam O'Flaherty gives you a pretty good idea of how hard life was there at this time (Jane Eyre was published while the famine was ongoing), especially for the poor.

As I'm one of the readers who clearly appreciated this book and found it worthwhile, I'll just leave a tiny observation I gleaned from the story, one which I also shared with my dad tonight (who recommended this book to me). Too often nowadays, people take hardline ideological stands that government regulation/intervention are always either all bad or all good. Well, in Famine you can see that it's never that clear. Government policy clearly helped set the stage for the famine to take a hard toll on the Irish people, making them vulnerable and exacerbating the famine's effect. (Bad government action!) And yet, when it came time for the government to step in and help the people, really doing some good, it did nothing. (Bad government lack of action!) So it's an example of not necessarily needing "less" or "more" government, but needing "better" government that works for the most people. Of course, "better" government isn't easy to define, but this is why we have Presidential debates ... right? /sarcasm/

Lauren says

I had to read this for my high school Irish Lit class. We read so many fantastic classics including Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett, and Frank McCourt, which almost all of my classmates loved. This was by far everyone's least favorite. Firstly, it is a pet peeve of mine when there are so many characters that a reader has to make a chart of some kind to keep track of them. It's like an author being cocky and saying, "It's my story. You do the work." Also, on the subject of characters and pet peeves, the author made a two page description for each character as each one was introduced for the first time, mostly having to do with appearances. It is my opinion as both a reader and a writer that 1. character description should be revealed through action and plot (a very show vs. tell situation). In fact, I hated this so much that when I told my English teacher my opinion on this, she noticed it and became irritated herself. And 2. While appearances are very important to characters, in most cases and not all, behavior is ten times more essential. Lastly, this book was unbelievably melodramatic. Yes, yes, it's about the Irish potato famine, what else could it be besides a piece of melodrama? Still, no matter the subject, there is a line formed when there needs to be humor or empowerment or something.

Trisha says

I first heard about this book when I was in Ireland and visited several of the memorials and exhibits that have been created to honor the memories of the people who died as a result of the potato blight that struck Ireland in 1845 and 1846. Over half a million people died because of starvation or related diseases like typhus and cholera. Obviously this was not an exhilarating read! For one thing, before even opening it up I knew it was not going to have a happy ending. Readers are immediately introduced to the three generations of the Kilmartin family who live together in a cramped little cottage on the land they have rented for years from the

local landlord. Before the first chapter ends readers have already seen evidence of what that miserable little fungus Phytophthora infestans can do. Within hours of being infected potato fields that were green and thriving, quickly turned into putrid masses of foul smelling, black plants. People could literally watch the destruction spread across their fields and out across the fields of their neighbors in the valley. The novel describes all this in harrowing detail, as well its effects on the people who depended on their potato crops for survival. We're also given a terrible glimpse into the landlord system that existed in Ireland at the time -- Absentee English landlords who relied on unscrupulous land agents to force rents out of starving tenants, eventually evicting them because they could not pay. Most horrible of all was the realization that while thousands and thousands of Irish people were dying because they had no food, ships laden with cattle, sheep and other crops that had not been touched by the famine were leaving Ireland to end up supplying the lavish lifestyles of wealthy English aristocrats. It was not a pretty picture and definitely not an easy book to read. But having Irish ancestors on both sides of our family who immigrated from Ireland around the time of the famine, this book was compelling if for no other reason than to shed a little light on why they came.

Barbara says

Such evil that people do to one another in the name of religion, politics and custom! Took this off my SOUB but I think I must have read it years ago because I had such a visceral reaction to it. I hope it's the only one of its kind but I think now I've read all I need to about that period of Irish history.

Willeke Van Eeckhoutte says

Brilliant & harrowing... A must-read for people who love novels about accurate Irish history!

Shannon says

I found this book about a family in the Irish famine to be a very interesting view into the lives of those back then. I found this book a little hard to get into, certainly not one I couldn't put down, but I did like it. Of course, it is a little depressing, but what can you expect from a book about the famine?

Glynis says

Set in Ireland during the Great Famine in the 1840's, it is a family saga featuring the Kilmartins. The writing style is very different from most books I read, perhaps because it was written in the last century (1970's!).

The 2 star rating may increase as I get further into the book.

4/6/09 - this book is still on my bedside table, although it at the bottom. More interesting books just keep coming along.

Antje says

Was für ein Roman! O' Flaherty ist ein Meister der Erzählkunst und versteht es in beeindruckender wie gnadenloser Weise, die entsetzlichen Folgen der Kartoffelpest Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts in Irland zu schildern. Hauptangelpunkt ist hierbei der Drei-Generationen-Haushalt der Kilmartins im Schwarzen Tal, der ums nackte Überleben kämpft.

Für jedermann, der sich für dieses irische Schicksal interessiert, bietet der Roman einen ausgezeichneten Einstieg. Anschaulicher können Elend, Hunger, Hoffnungslosigkeit und Tod nicht beschrieben werden, so auch die Verwandlung von Mensch und Tier in scheinbar abgestumpfte und vom Überlebenstrieb zu widerlichen Handlungen gezwungene Wesen. - Natürlich ist dies ein düsterer Roman, der nachdenklich und traurig stimmt. Aber der schlechende und grausame Tod von einer Million Menschen sollte dies auch!

Alexander Creecy says

fantastic read

Vanessa says

The story of a family during the Irish Great Hunger. Liam O'Flaherty shows with pure honesty how horrendous their plight was, how hunger made them desperate and mad for some and there is no judgement here. The descriptions of the land make you feel like you are in Ireland and make you picture the country as it was then, as it still is in some remote parts. If you lived there, it makes you long to go back, to breath the air those who died breathed, to pay a tribute to those who, only because they were Irish, were challenged to their really core by those who only thought in terms of economic profits.

The characters are endearing and try to stand up for their right or try to simply find a way to survive the successive blights, which little by little, became just impossible. We are given a real insight into the soul of Irishmen and women and they had it more than tough! How can a man do that to another man? To read this story is to remember or simply to know.

A. Mary says

O'Flaherty set himself an intricate task because Famine isn't a simple kind of historical undertaking. It doesn't merely make use of a period everyone knows well (or thinks is well known). Rather, O'Flaherty has to educate at the same time as he creates his characters and setting. His novel doesn't end up being a dull set of lesson plans. He broadly sets the stage in a village when blight appears at the beginning of the Great Hunger, with some households better able to weather a weak harvest, and quickly shows how natural disaster and legal structure erase that difference. There are villains, beautiful maidens, daring young men, and all the rest of it--good and bad clergy and wicked shopkeepers. As the novel progresses, we want to know who will live, who will die, will Michael escape, what justices and injustices will emerge. O'Flaherty shows some of the horrors of the starvation, but he does not seek to crush a reader with it. He wants to make many things known, and he succeeds.

Angela Wade says

Part history lesson, part gripping fiction. Rips your heart out slowly until you find yourself bawling on the floor in a corner in the dark.

Etain Feeley says

This has to be one of the most, heart rendering books that I have ever read, so awful, a dreadful period in the history of the Irish State, so many having lost their lives and all because of bureaucracy and political ineptitude.

Beautifully crafted, it captures vividly those dark days. The reader is sucked into an abyss of horror, the tangible damp smell of rotting potatoes prevails throughout.

Kate says

Although this book isn't as well written as some of my other favorite Irish writers (Frank O'Conner, Brendan Behan, Sean O'Faolain), it is the only novel I have read about a family's experience of the potato famine. It was written well enough to keep me reading it almost straight through - very suspenseful and sad.

Richard says

O'Flaherty brings the Great Irish Famine vividly to life... which is, of course, rather depressing. Nevertheless, I agree that Mary Kilmartin (the heroine) is one of the great creations of 20th-century Irish fiction.

Tam says

Slow for me to get into, but engaging. A broad survey of the lives of many different people in the Black Valley. It vividly portrays both the helplessness and the horror of the famine that strikes them.

Padraic says

Most Irish Americans I know think of the Famine this way: Bloody British.

I think of the Famine this way: the family dog may have eaten your dead ancestors. Simpler, perhaps, but a lot more visceral.

O'Flaherty was not the first Irish writer to note how quiet the Irish countryside got in 1849, but he used it to best effect.

Rebecca says

This is not the sort of book one enjoys reading. But it is the sort that brings tears to your eyes and a sense of grief.

The tragedy of a family and those around them shows the tragedy of an entire nation.

Tony says

FAMINE. (1937). Liam O'Flaherty. ***.

This is a massive saga penned by the author of "The Informer." The author traces three generations of the Kilmartin family from the onset of the great potato blight of the 1840s. The author does manage to make you understand the reasons for the resultant famine that cost the lives of between 1.0 and 1.5 men, women, and children. In addition to this loss, the famine forced over 2 million individuals to emigrate to America, Canada, and Australia. While weaving the story of the family throughout, O'Flaherty manages to point out the role the British played in not providing the appropriate education or relief measures that could have saved countless lives. It turns out that the blight organism probably originated in Mexico and then travelled up through the United States and ultimately overseas. It was not just Ireland that had the potato blight – it affected the U.S. and Europe, too. Fortunately, however, the U.S. and Europe were not dependent on the potato for their only source of nourishment as were the Irish. The other issue was the lack of genetic variability of the potato in Ireland. They essentially planted the same variety of potato year after year. Without genetic diversity to take up the slack, the total crop was affected. The actual story of the Kilmartins in this saga is essentially molded to reflect the events of the times they lived through, and all of the possible ills that the famine brought were reflected in their behavior through the author's plotting. There have been some excellent studies of the Irish famine written over the years, but this author's setting within a fictional family makes it easy for the average reader to understand the various forces at play.

Sam says

I am ashamed to admit that I gave up on this book after 150 pages or so. Maybe it wasn't the book's fault and I was just too distracted by other things to focus on it properly. It was a sad and atmospheric story about life in Ireland during the potato famine, which in tone and content somehow reminded me of The Grapes of Wrath. The author seemed more concerned with the bigger picture -- the plot, the characters, the history -- than with the sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph details of the writing. I'll finish it someday and then finish this review with a final verdict on whether or not I liked the book.

