

The Ghosts of Belfast by Stuart Neville

Reading Group Guide

1) *The Ghosts of Belfast* is set in post-conflict Northern Ireland and examines the gap between the peace that exists on the surface and the tension beneath. How did the Belfast portrayed in the book compare to your preconceptions of the city? Did it present a familiar image, one you know from news reports of the Troubles and the peace process, or was it something different from what you expected?

2) In the past, many Americans have viewed Irish paramilitaries in a romanticised way, seeing them as freedom fighters rather than terrorists. In turn, Irish paramilitaries have played up to that image and used it to help raising funds in the US, with many millions of dollars funnelled into both the political and militant strands. To what extent does the book dispel or reinforce this romanticised view? Do you think Americans, including those prominent Irish Americans who have publicly supported Irish paramilitaries in the past, have a different perspective on political violence after 9/11?

3) The novel's protagonist, Gerry Fegan, has carried out horrendous acts in his past and commits more murders in the course of the story. He would be the villain in most books, but the author asks the reader to empathise, if not sympathise, with him. Does the novel succeed in making him sympathetic? If so, how?

4) Readers of the UK edition of the book, including some critics, have been divided in their interpretation of Gerry Fegan's "followers". Some are convinced they are paranormal entities, the actual spirits of the people he killed in the past. Others are adamant they are psychological manifestations of his guilt, figments of his remorseful and drink-addled imagination. Which is the correct reading: ghosts of the dead or phantoms of the mind?

5) Gerry Fegan seeks atonement for past killings by spilling yet more blood. The novel takes no moral stance on the idea of violence as a means of correcting injustice, and Fegan himself is conflicted on this. Should the book have condemned Fegan's actions more clearly? While the story is entirely fictional, is the reader in a way complicit in the bloodshed by empathising with the killer? Does that reflect on the reader's, or indeed the author's, own moral standards? Can violence ever be justified given the right social or moral context?