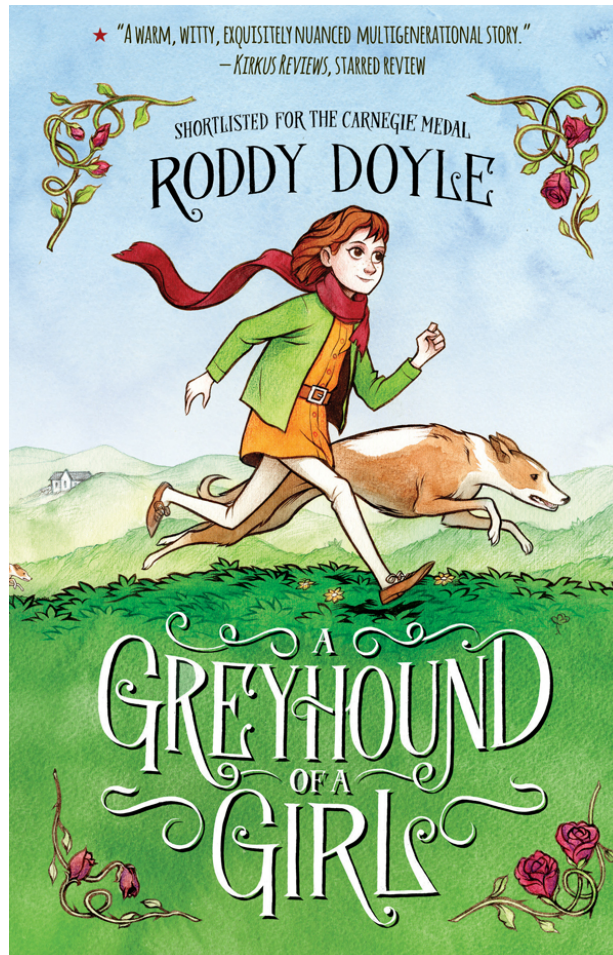


# Reading Guide:

# A GREYHOUND OF A GIRL



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## Q&A with Roddy Doyle

*What inspired you to write a novel about four generations of women?*

Two fictional women came together in my head. I wanted to write about a girl, just before she officially becomes a teenager, who feels and anticipates the changes that are happening to her. So, that was one of the women. I called her Mary. The other woman was inspired by my grandmother. She died in 1928, when my mother was a little girl. Obviously, I never knew her. I always wondered about her—what she'd been like and what she would have been like if she'd lived to be an older woman. I decided to make her Mary's great-grandmother. Between these two women there had to be two more generations—Mary's mother and grandmother. That made four: girl, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. They'd be very different but would have a lot in common too.

*Are the characters in *A GREYHOUND OF A GIRL* inspired by women in your family or life?*

Tansey, the great-grandmother, is inspired by my grandmother, whose name was actually Ellen. As I said, she died in 1928, of the flu. My mother was only three when it happened. It's a sad story. What makes it sadder is the fact that my mother grew up knowing almost nothing about her. She couldn't remember her face, although she could remember her mother's hands doing things—peeling an apple, for example. She didn't even know her mother's name and knew nothing about where she'd come from or where the rest of her mother's family lived. When my mother was much older, in her fifties, she found letters addressed to my grandfather. They'd been written in the 1920s, and they all came from America—from New York. The surname on most of them was Beekman. My mother told someone she knew who worked for the Irish telephone service, who then photocopied all the Beekman pages from the New York phone directory. My mother wrote to all of them. Two answered. She discovered she had cousins living on Long Island: her mother's family had emigrated together and settled there. My mother visited them, and they came to Ireland. She was delighted to find this family, and they were delighted to have Irish cousins. It was a very happy ending to a sad story. Tansey—the ghost—is inspired by that story. I wanted her to come back to life—like my mother's family had in my mother's life.

*What made you choose the east coast of Ireland as the setting for the women's journey?*

There are two reasons. Firstly, the more obvious journey in Irish stories is from east to west, from Dublin City, on the east coast, to the beautiful, wild landscape of the west, in Galway. It's been done many times, and I wanted to go for a different route. Secondly, my mother's father and mother both came from Wexford, in the southeast of the country. I know it very well, and love it. When I was a child, it seemed like a long journey there, although it was only seventy-five miles. But the roads were bad; the cars were slower. Today, the journey can be done very quickly—it's a straight highway all the way. I thought it would be amusing, and interesting, for the older women to experience a different kind of trip, to the same place—if that makes sense. The house the women visit, the ruin, is inspired by a house that it actually isn't a ruin at all, that is still lived in by my mother's cousins.

*Is there someone you wish would visit you in ghost form? What would you talk about?*

I never really knew my grandparents. They were either dead before I was born or died soon after. I'd love to meet one, or all, of them now and chat with them as an adult. My grandfathers were both involved in the War of Independence here in Ireland, in the early 1920s. My father's mother I remember a bit. She reared not only her own large family but the families of two of her sisters as well. She lived in a house with no running water, but she was very elegant. Judging by the stories I grew up hearing, they were all interesting, funny people who lived very full lives.

*This book illustrates the importance of family. How important is family in your life?*

I grew up in a family, and I now have a family of my own. So my own family is vital to me. But I don't think I have an opinion on family life outside of my own. When I start a story with a character, one of the first questions I have to ask myself is, "Does she have brothers or sisters?" and "What are they like—older or younger?" The fictional family starts to grow, because it's part of the story.

*Whether you are writing for adults or children, you often write about children and teens. What in particular interests you about young people, and how has your own childhood influenced your writing?*

I like the way young people take command of their lives, especially the language. They invent new words; they put a new rhythm on old phrases; they put great

energy into how they express themselves. Even one angry word from a teenager can seem to carry great confidence and hope. At the moment, I'm writing a novel for adults about a man in his late forties. I particularly enjoy writing about him in the company of his children—how they express themselves, how they get across their own ideas, how their personalities are captured in the words that they choose—or, in this case, the words I chose for them.

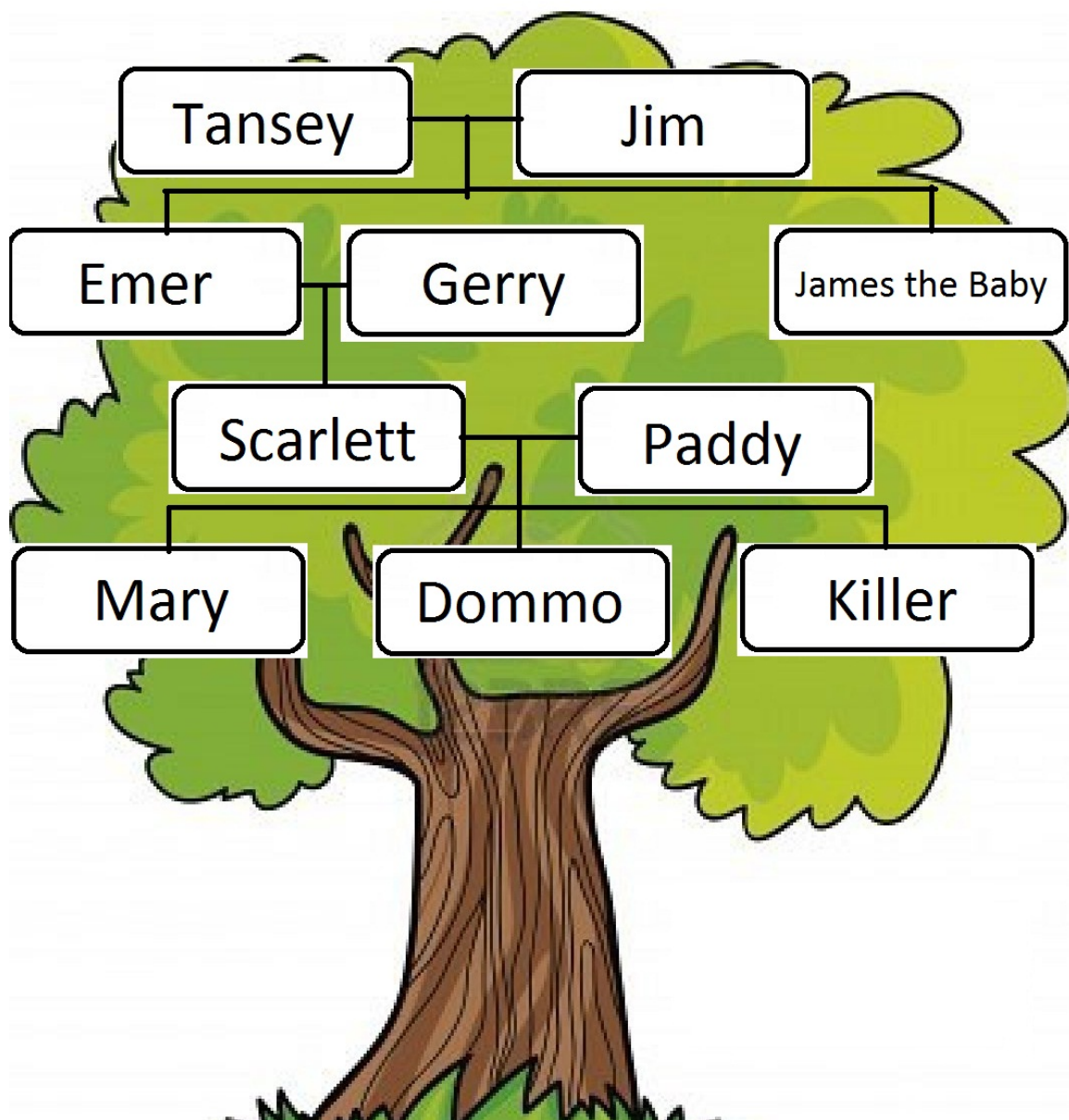
Any writer will tell you that their childhood is an important part of their toolkit—or something like that! I've used my school days, the locality I grew up in, the way it changed from rural to urban, the music I used to love—all sorts of small moments from my childhood and teen years push their way to the front of my head when I'm writing. I often push them back!

*You run a writing center for underprivileged children and teens in Dublin. How did writing make a difference in your life, and what difference do you think it can make in the lives of young people?*

The writing center, called Fighting Words, is actually for all young people, regardless of their circumstances. We see creative writing as an important human right. Children who are otherwise privileged often don't get the opportunity to express themselves creatively; as they get older, creativity is pushed aside and considered unimportant. It's a different kind of poverty.

The most striking thing about writing, I find as I get older, is that your life can be your research. The happy moments, the awful ones—they all can inspire, or form part of, a piece of writing. I'm not talking about autobiography—I've no real interest in it. I have a character listening to a piece of music: what words would I use to describe his reaction to it? I have a character, a child, standing in front of a refrigerator: what does she hope to find in there? These are questions we can all answer because we've lived them. It's a question of selecting the words.

## Family Tree



Want to read more? Check out ***A Greyhound of a Girl*** by Roddy Doyle (now in paperback: \$7.95!) — Summer 2012 Kid's Indie Next List Children's Selection, with starred reviews from *Kirkus* and *Booklist*.

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For information, interviews, and more:  
Please contact Morgan Dubin: [mdubin@abramsbooks.com](mailto:mdubin@abramsbooks.com), 212-229-7128

# Roddy Doyle Talks about Writing Dialogue

“I see people in terms of dialogue, and I believe that people are their talk.” —Roddy Doyle.

I live in a city of talkers. People here in Dublin talk on buses, in trains, in queues—everywhere. When I started writing my first book, I decided to write about a group of young people who were forming a band. It struck me that the way to make them seem real was not to describe their physical appearances but to get them talking. Writing is words. My characters would be words too.

If you’re writing dialogue, the question to ask constantly is: Does my character talk like that? Write the dialogue first, and then judge it. Read it out loud. Make changes. Ask yourself: What little thing can I do make this piece of dialogue seem like the words of one particular person and no one else? For example, is there a word or phrase that they use more than other people do? Listen to real people, and rob their words.

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# The Journey



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# Irish to English Dictionary

cinema (p. 12) – Movie theatre.

eejits (p. 171) — Irish slang. An eejit is an idiot, fool, or imbecile. The word, in the right hands, can be quite affectionate. “You’re an eejit,” if delivered with a smile, can actually mean “I love you.” But practice first before you say it.

grand (p. 32) – Good, of acceptable quality. “Grand” in Ireland doesn’t mean anything special, it just meant things are “fine” or “okay.”

kilometers (p. 5) — A unit of measurement in the metric system equal to 1,000 meters. A kilometer is five-eighths of a mile.

lorry (p. 4) — A motor vehicle designed to transport cargo; a truck.

Lynx (p. 21) — The name for Axe grooming products in Ireland, the U.K., South Africa, and Australia.

moved house (p. 5) — Moving from one house to another.

mucky (p. 29) — Covered in mud or dirt, filthy.

telly (p. 25) — Slang for television. Why use four syllables when two will do?

quare (p. 36) — “Quare” can mean “strange” or “great,” or both. If we like something we eat or drink, we often say, “That’s quare stuff.” Older people say much more than young people—maybe because they eat and drink more.

yeuk (p. 51) — An expression often used when we see something horrible, especially if it’s rotten or blood-covered. The American equivalent is “yuck.” In this case, Mary uses the word as the horrible thing itself. So, the “yeuk” is the rotten squashed banana covering her schoolbooks.



## Discussion Questions

What is the significance of greyhounds in the story?

If you could go back in time and ask one person one question, who would it be and what would you ask?

What is the role of the flu in the story? How does it help frame the differences in the four generations of women?

Ghosts are represented differently by different authors. If you were writing a ghost story, what would your ghost(s) look like? What would be the details of their haunting? Would they feel the cold, for instance? Be otherworldly-looking or ordinary?

What is something all four women in *A GREYHOUND OF A GIRL* have in common? How does this shape the story?

The characters in the book, particularly Mary, are often described as “cheeky.” How does this character trait impact how the story unfolds?

What role do the men (fathers and brothers) play in the book?

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