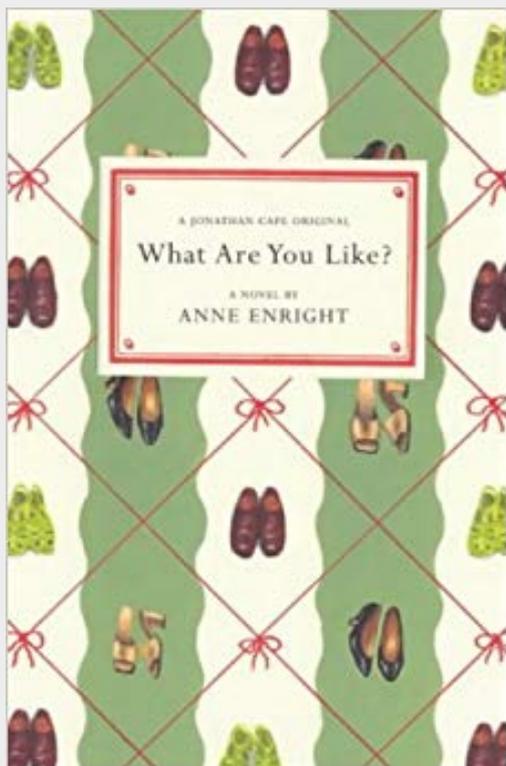


## What Are You Like? (a Jonathan Cape Original) by Anne Enright



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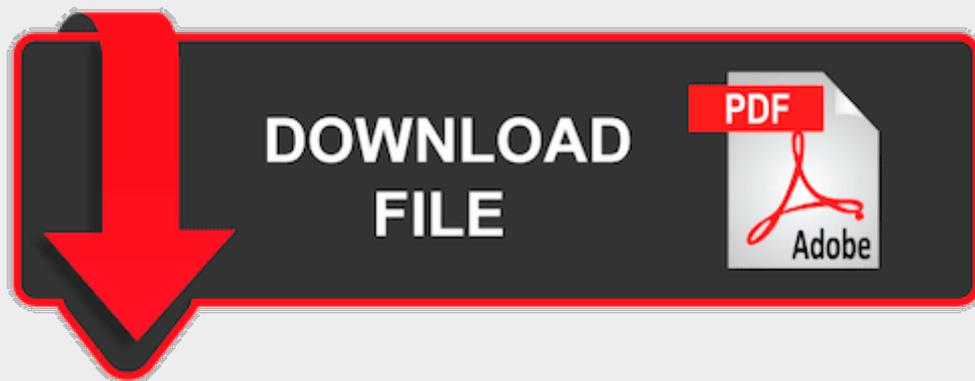
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## Reviews of the What Are You Like? (a Jonathan Cape Original) by Anne Enright

### 1. Efmprof

Yes, this amazing novel is comprised of beautifully, mysteriously worded sentences within story fragments. It challenges you as a reader to simply read and enjoy, and not waste time puzzling out how it will all come together in the end. Like an art film, really. Sit back and let the gorgeous

language and the vivid images it engenders engage you in the moment. The ending is so right. Then you see how from the very first sentence the author knew exactly what she was about, how she would weave very fine story threads in and out, in and out, to make a breathtaking novel.

## 2. Gldasiy

Anne Enright is an amazing force in literature. She writes with a very distinctive style that is engaging, thought-provoking and interesting. I've never read a book of hers that I didn't like

## 3. Tojahn

Enright's prose can be powerful, original, even odd, but also challenging despite a sentence structure that is by no means complex. The book is about some of the stultifying aspects of Irish culture, and the impact of not being raised by your birth parents. I do not think my appreciation of either topic was deepened by the novel. At the same time I found "What Are You Like" quite readable and enjoyable despite the problems I had with it.

Enright withholds some important pieces of information until what she considers the right time, but given the book's challenges, I offer the following to new readers, at risk of spoiling that satisfaction which comes from sudden enlightenment. Bert and his dying wife had two daughters. One was Maria, and the other was Rose, who was given up for adoption.

## 4. Jeronashe

[2.5 stars] After reading *THE GATHERING*, the book that recently won Anne Enright the Man Booker Award, I picked up this earlier novel to see whether it would share the same preoccupations. It does, in its interest in exploring how women feel and think, its concern with the dynamics of mostly dysfunctional families, and its obsession with the grosser aspects of the human body. It shares the same ambience: Dublin and England, though here with some scenes in New York thrown in. Here too, Enright has the reader piece the story together in fragments as she jumps around in place and time. Here too, she comes up with passages that are unusual, even poetic, but too often maddening in their obliquity; the following paragraph is typical:

"That night Evelyn dreamed of sperm and the smell maddened her. It lingered in the morning and made her ashamed. It was her fifty-third birthday. Time to throw things out, she thought, and started with a plastic bag full of shoes that had taken the shape of her feet. Ghost steps, and all the wanderings she had never made, knotted at the top and left out for the bin men, waltzing in the quiet, in the rain."

The image of that bag of shoes is insightful and true. But although the final sentence is beautiful as poetry, it makes little sense as prose. And Evelyn's dream of sperm is entirely gratuitous, as are most of the physical references in the book. Here, for a comparatively innocuous example, is her description of children following their mothers into a department-store changing room: "They came in sometimes, the little Caesars, all new beside the bellies that they had sloughed off." A striking image, certainly, but when people are persistently reduced to bags, pipes, and plumbing, they quickly lose their humanity.

I can't say much in detail about the book without giving the plot away. Suffice it to say that there are two principal characters, young women in their early twenties for most of the book. Enright is quite good at plumbing their psychological lives: their pale aspirations, their failures in work or love, and the compromises they make to keep on living. For both women, for different reasons, are incomplete. Yes, there is a happier ending, perhaps a little too good to be true. But is it worth undergoing such a fractured and frustrating journey to get there?

## 5. Roram

At first, I didn't like Anne Enright's novel at all. I found it very hard to

identify with any of the characters. Anne Enright's style of writing is quite singular, and takes some time getting used to. It took about a hundred pages before I really started to enjoy this composition.

Enright's narrative jumps forwards and backwards through time, leaping from one perspective to another. The restless nature of this novel makes it very hard prey to track down. Anne Enright's prose is very subtle too.

Incidents flash by, but the gun kicks very little. I admittedly found myself lost in the early part of the novel, especially when minor characters came to the forefront, and then disappeared. This novel either seems as though it has been culled too well or not enough. There's quite a lot of extraneous material that hints at a broader narrative, with good ideas dispatched all too soon, so that you almost never get a handle on them in the first place. This novel stands comparison with Trezza Azzopardi's Booker nominated 'The Hiding Place'. Azzopardi also has a quite developed and unique style, and her narrative also flits through time, and from person to person. Yet, even although Azzopardi doesn't give a time and date for each chapter as Enright does, you're never ever lost in 'The Hiding Place' as you are in 'What are you Like?'. Enright's novel is mostly the tale of two identical twin sisters divided at birth: Maria and Marie. One gets the impression that maybe Enright thought about keeping these two very similar names for her main protagonists: thankfully, Marie is also called Rose. When their mother dies during labour, Berts, their father, decides that he can only cope with one of the twins. It doesn't seem to matter particularly which one. Thus are the twins divided. Rose is adopted, and brought up in an English middle class home. Maria, brought up by Berts and new wife Evelyn, rebels and runs off to New York and goes a little mad. We seem to get more of her childhood than Rose's. Maria falls in love with the wrong man, and comes across a photograph of herself in his wallet when 12 - but the background and the "parents" are completely unfamiliar. Rose contemplates marriage with a Yuppie, and has an urge to find the mother who gave her up. Her quest brings treasures she never quite expected... This novel is mostly viewed through the eyes of women, with Berts the only strong male character. It's almost as if Enright has to remind you of his presence towards the end, by his having a drunken kiss with a female co-worker at a Christmas party. It's a well-told incident, but I've a suspicion that it's only been included to add a bit of melodrama. Evelyn, Berts' wife, is considering leaving him, and then she finds a letter from a strange woman... There are so many perspectives from the women characters that you can often put the book down, and forget where you were when you start to read again. Towards the end, the twins' mother, Anna, speaks from the dead in the first person. This is done so matter of factly that no hint of the supernatural is ever allowed to shine through. Anna tells the story of her life, but her privileged voice doesn't ever really seem to say anything significant. Although the divide between the generations of these women is done very well indeed: Evelyn and Anna spent their youth in a very different world from Maria and Rose. Berts notices that women's behaviour has changed a lot over his lifetime, and

has to get used to the idea that women are drinking a lot more nowadays and that the term 'typing pool' is no longer politically correct or even employable.

Enright's prose is so subtle that it does take a long time for you to feel anything for the characters. Indeed, there are glimpses of the Kennedy family background, of the boy Valentine gone mad which hints at the cause of Maria's mental distress and of her mother's eccentricity. The resolution is also a quite trite and maybe a little too concise. However, Enright's prose is still a joy to read. She has a lot of wit, and there are great one-liners. She's also incredibly good at capturing the consciousness of her protagonists. There's a delicious passage where Maria's mind's eye sees a lamp and a coat in a window across the road as a hanging body. Even though she knows that the delusion is not real, her imagination still gets her incredibly worked up. Overall, this is a bitsy book, which doesn't quite fulfil all its ambitions. However, if you stick with it as I did, then you'll find Anne Enright's novel hugely rewarding towards the end.

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