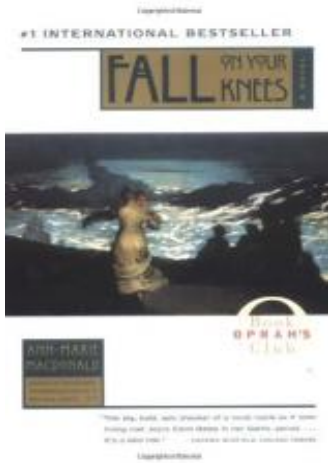


# Fall on Your Knees

by Ann-Marie MacDonald

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## About the Book

The Piper family is steeped in secrets, lies, and unspoken truths. At the eye of the storm is one secret that threatens to shake their lives -- even destroy them.

Set on stormy Cape Breton Island off Nova Scotia, *Fall on Your Knees* is an internationally acclaimed multigenerational saga that chronicles the lives of four unforgettable sisters. Theirs is a world filled with driving ambition, inescapable family bonds, and forbidden love.

Compellingly written, by turns menacingly dark and hilariously funny, this is an epic tale of five generations of sin, guilt, and redemption

## Discussion Guide

1. In the Prologue "Silent Pictures", the author sets the scene through a narrator's voice and drops you into the middle of the Piper family's tangled relationships. Did the tale unfold as you expected? Who did you first believe the original narrator was? Think about how the narrator's voice changes throughout the novel. How does the shifting point of view affect the telling of the story?

2. When Materia runs away with James at 13, Mr. Mahmoud makes her marry James but then gives them a house and disowns his daughter. Were you surprised by the apparent contradiction? What kind of message did this send to Materia, her mother and her siblings? And, what role do you think this abandonment plays in her unraveling?

**3.** James is a complex character. In some ways we feel compassion for him but in others we grow to hate him. Discuss what you think drove him at times to protect his family and at times to destroy them? What do you think his motives were for the choices that he made?

**4.** Religion and skin color play a large role in separating and defining the characters in this novel. For example, Mrs. Luvovitz, Materia's only friend, is Jewish and married to the kosher butcher. James is Protestant and married to the Catholic Materia. Materia's father was Catholic but claims he took the name Mahmoud in honor of the Muslim woman who protected him from death. Also, Materia is Lebanese and dark. James is Gaelic and pale. James doesn't even realize that Albert, his best friend in the mine, is black because of the soot and dim lighting. Jameel who is Lebanese and married to Materia's sister Camille is "shit-scared of being seen as colored" (p.335). What role do you think all these differences play in the interactions of the characters? And, how do you think these differences would be seen today as opposed to 100 years ago?

**5.** Cape Breton Island is a landscape of forlorn beauty enveloped in a new-found poverty due to the Depression. How does the setting affect or mirror the people in it? Why do you think the author chose an island to set the scene, and what is the role of the surrounding sea? Do you think the community's isolation is a factor in it becoming an accepting "melting pot"? And, what role does wealth play in social position and status for families like the Mahmouds, the Pipers and the Taylors?

**6.** The author uses foreshadowing skillfully throughout her novel. For example, Materia uses scissors to snip the kidneys for the kidney pie then uses them to perform a Cesarian on her illegitimately pregnant daughter. What are some examples of foreshadowing you thought were most effective or haunting? Did the author take you where you expected? Or were there plot twists that surprised you?

**7.** Incest is a recurrent theme throughout the novel. James enlists in the army during WWI in part due to his sexual feelings for his daughter Kathleen and later acts on these urges with Frances. Did you realize what Mercedes witnessed with James and Frances on the "rocking chair" before or after she did? And, what role do you think that incest plays in Frances becoming a bawdy "little girl" stripper who performs sexual favors for cash?

**8.** During her mother's funeral, Frances begins to convulse with laughter. She expects punishment yet receives compassion. They think she's crying. And, she realizes, "The facts of the situation don't necessarily indicate anything about the truth of the situation. In this moment, fact and truth become separated and commence to wander like twins in a fairy tale, waiting to be united by that special someone who possesses the secret of telling them apart" (page 137). Cite some examples of how this statement rang true throughout the book and how some things aren't what they seem when you dig away at the surface.

**9.** Though concerned about the possibility of a mixed marriage, Mercedes promises her heart to Ralph. He breaks his promise not because of religion but because he falls in love with another women at college. Were you surprised at how easily Ralph's parents accepted his new Catholic wife especially in the early part of the 20th century? Do you think Mercedes ever moves past this heartache?

**10.** Mercedes believes that Lily is a candidate for sainthood in part due to her incredible compassion and ability to cure but also in part due to the voices Mercedes believes she hears and the things she senses. Do you believe that Lily is exceptional? Do you think Ambrose really visits her? How could Lily remember things that happened as early as her

infancy? What role do the spirits play throughout the novel?

**11.** On page 334, MacDonald writes "The thief you fear the most is not the one who steals mere things." She's referring to Teresa who knows that Frances stole Mrs. Mahmoud's jewelry but fears more what Frances is up to next with regard to Ginger and their family. What are other examples of things stolen (both tangible and intangible) in the book?

**12.** Why does Frances take Ginger to the mine? What is it about him that makes her want to bear his child so badly? How do you think the pregnancy survived the bullet? And, do you believe Frances knew what really happened to her child? How much do you think race had to do with Mercedes' decision?

**13.** Friendship doesn't come easily for the Pipers. Most of their relationships are strained or taboo. Discuss how Rose and Kathleen's relationship develops and how music ties them together. They also share an unusual and ironic tie -- Rose, who is black, has a white, blond mother and Kathleen, who is fair, has a dark-skinned mother of Middle Eastern descent. Why do you think Kathleen is drawn to Rose in the way that she is? And, what do you think of the way James ends the union?

**14.** Throughout the book, you're never quite sure who fathered Kathleen's twins. Did you ever think that James might actually be Lily's father? Who did you think it was and did your opinion change over time? The author doesn't make the lineage absolutely clear until the family tree is delivered to Lily in New York at the very end of the book. Were you surprised by what you learned? Do you think Lily is surprised by all the connections?

**15.** On the surface, the Pipers could seem like a "normal family" but when you peel back the layers, a very different picture is revealed. Did you ever meet a person or family with unusual circumstances and connections that you accidentally uncovered? Could you identify with any of the characters? And, if so, why? If the story continued, what do you think would become of Lily in New York?

**16.** At the end of the novel, many of the characters have died and Lily is living far from "home". Do you see this as a new beginning or as the sad close of a tale? Do you think the novel has a redemptive ending? What constitutes redemption?

## Author Bio

Novelist and dramatist Ann-Marie MacDonald is the author of the internationally bestselling and award-winning novel **Fall on Your Knees**. She is also the playwright of *Goodnight Desdemona*, *Good Morning Juliet*, which won the Governor General's Award for Drama. She lives in Toronto.

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**Publication Date:** February 8, 2013

**Paperback:** 512 pages

**Publisher:** Touchstone

**ISBN-10:** 0743237188

**ISBN-13:** 9780743237185