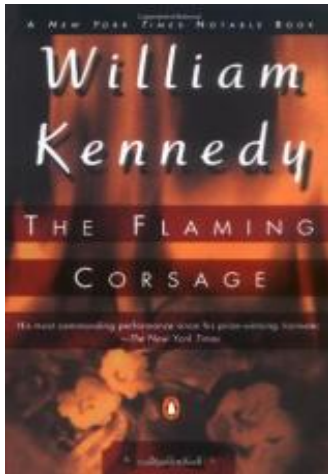


The Flaming Corsage

by William Kennedy



About the Book

The Flaming Corsage begins with the "Love Nest Killings of 1908." From this dramatic, bloody scene in a Manhattan hotel room, Kennedy moves his plotline both forward and backward, the events ranging from 1884 to 1912. Eventually, and ever so deliberately, much of the truth about the love nest killings will be revealed. Surprises are in store.

At the heart of the novel are two characters who will be somewhat familiar to Kennedy readers: the Irish American playwright Edward Daugherty and his wife, the upper-class Protestant Katrina Taylor Daugherty. Edward woos the enchanting and mysterious Katrina and she seems to reciprocate his love; however, a catastrophic fire changes everything for the young married couple, as Katrina loses part of her family and is irreparably scarred by "the flaming corsage."

The development of Edward's play writing career coincides with Katrina's increasing withdrawal from the world of reality. Their lives become more and more complicated as mutual adulteries surface; Edward's with a voluptuous actress and Katrina's with the young Francis Phelan.

Ever present is Kennedy's Albany; the details of the old Irish North End, where Emmett Daugherty receives his church's last rites, and the elegant Elk Street, where the imposing and austere Taylor mansion stands. But *The Flaming Corsage* also portrays some more unsavory parts of town, depicted with acute precision in venues like the red-light tents of the State Fair.

Discussion Guide

1.If you came to *The Flaming Corsage* with prior knowledge of characters like Edward, Katrina, and Emmett (based on your readings of earlier Kennedy novels) did you find yourself using that knowledge in this reading? If you came to *The Flaming Corsage* without prior knowledge of characters like Edward, Katrina, and Emmett, did you consider them

to be sufficiently developed in this novel?

2. Albany as venue has by now become indelibly associated with Kennedy. What various components and aspects of the city between 1884 and 1912 (and of America itself) are significant in *The Flaming Corsage*?

3. How important is Edward Daugherty's Irish ancestry to *The Flaming Corsage*? How important is the historical information about Ireland, especially the information delivered through Edward's "manifesto," to the novel?

4. Discuss the principal traits of each of the main characters, and discuss whether they remain static or become dynamic (that is, change in a significant, essential way) in the novel; if they do change, discuss the reasons why.

5. Consider any or all of the following as broad topics that may lead you, as you think about the specifics of *The Flaming Corsage*, to a recognition of possible themes of the novel: the collision of social classes and religious worlds; the place of the immigrant in established American society; the optimism of passionate, romantic love; the fragility of the human mind; the effects of guilt; the effects of loss.

6. Another virtual Kennedy trademark is the presence of rollicking fun during certain situations that have the trappings of disaster. Is this technique old-fashioned "comic relief"? Or is there a more significant reason for this infusion of humor?

Author Bio

William Kennedy was born on January 16, 1928 in the predominantly Irish neighborhood of North Albany, New York. His first recorded experiences as a writer occurred during his high school years at the Christian Brothers Academy, where Kennedy wrote for the newspaper. While earning his B. A. at Siena College, Loudonville, New York, Kennedy edited the school's newspaper and served as associate editor of its magazine.

In 1956, Kennedy worked as a columnist and an assistant managing editor of the *Puerto Rico World Journal*, a San Juan newspaper for an English speaking audience. The paper folded after nine months, but by the end of the next year, Kennedy had already earned jobs as a reporter for the *Miami Herald*, a freelance journalist for Time-Life publications, and a reporter for Knight Newspapers. He had also married Dana Sosa, a dancer, whom he had met in Puerto Rico.

In 1959, Kennedy became managing editor of the *San Juan Star*. Two years later he attended Saul Bellow's creative writing workshop at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, and resigned his editorship to devote his full time to writing fiction.

Kennedy went home to Albany in 1963 to care for his father, who was living alone. He accepted part-time work from the *Albany Times Union*. By 1965, his articles about Albany's slums and racial integration had won state and local awards and were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Between 1968 and 1970, Kennedy was film critic for the *Times Union*, and in 1969 published his first novel, *The Ink Truck*. The reading world had been introduced to William Kennedy's Albany and to the first of his fictional individualists, the striker Bailey.

In 1975, after painstaking research and numerous narrative experiments, Kennedy published *Legs*, a fictional account of the rise and fall of Jack "Legs" Diamond. In 1978, Kennedy's Phelan family made its first appearance in published

fiction, *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*, bringing the reader to the streets of Albany's "nighttown," a world of gamblers, kidnappers and political bosses. In 1983 Kennedy published *O Albany!*, a collection of essays on Albany's neighborhoods and ethnic history.

In 1983, Kennedy won a prestigious MacArthur Foundation fellowship. In 1984, he won the Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Critics Circle Award, and a PEN-Faulkner award, all for *Ironweed* (which in 1987 was made into a feature film). During that same year Kennedy enjoyed "A City-Wide Celebration of Albany and William Kennedy" hosted by his city in pride for its native son.

After writing the screenplay for *The Cotton Club* in 1984, Kennedy wrote the nineteenth-century historical novel *Quinn's Book*, at whose center is a newspaper man turned fiction writer. In 1992, with *Very Old Bones*, Kennedy returned to the family Phelan. *Riding the Yellow Trolley Car: Selected Nonfiction* appeared in 1993, and in 1996 Kennedy published *The Flaming Corsage*, which he is currently adapting for a feature film for Universal Pictures.

It has been said time and time again that Kennedy has done for Albany what Joyce did for Dublin. More than a mere delineator of place and recorder of details, Kennedy has repeatedly succeeded in telling stories of unmistakably original characters who struggle against what, to borrow a few words from Hamlet, are life's slings and arrows.

William Kennedy and his wife, having raised three children, continue to live near Kennedy's inexhaustible Albany. In a book-filled and memorabilia-crammed study, the Albany Cycle continues.

Critical Praise

" Kennedy's most commanding performance since his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Ironweed*. "

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