

Inside the O'Briens

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Pt. 1: Book Synopsis

Inside the O'Briens is a novel by Lisa Genova. The story follows Joe O'Brien, an Irish, catholic, boston born-and-raised cop, who loves his wife and has four adult children. They all live under one roof in a multi-level townhouse. Joe and his wife, Rosie, live on one floor, their two daughters, Meghan and Katie, live on another floor, their son, Patrick, and their son, JJ, and his wife live on another floor. It is a third person limited point of view novel. It follows mainly Joe, but also touches on Katie. Katie works at a yoga studio and feels like she isn't paid enough attention to in her family. Meghan is a professional ballet dancer, JJ is a firefighter, and Patrick is a bartender who tends to attract negative attention from his parents. Joe is very traditional and extremely dedicated to his job. He is a stoic man who means well but struggles to show his love for his family. When he starts to drop or throw things randomly, struggles to stay still, and can't control his temper, his wife forces him to see a Doctor. It's then he is told he has Huntington's disease, a neurodegenerative disease that ultimately results in an early death. He has to learn how to cope with his limited life and has to tell his kids that they all have a 50% chance of inheriting the disease. Everyone is always hyper aware of the disease, what it is doing to Joe, and the fact that all the kids have a chance of inheriting it. They balance between ignoring the bad things are happening but also desperately wanting to talk about them. Joe, a man full of pride, ignores the disease as

long as possible. It isn't until it starts affecting his safety at work that he is forced to quit. The novel follows the family as they all learn how to live and love differently.

Pt. 2: Expressions of Love

There are many different kinds of love apparent in the novel. First, focusing on Joe and Rosie, the husband and wife have become comfortable in their love. They know what the other likes, they know how to please the other, and they know how their marriage works at this point in their lives. They tend to exhibit mainly Storge love. According to the text *Close Encounters: Communication in Relationships*, Storge is also known as the "companionate love." Physical attraction is no longer the key aspect of the relationships. It is based on high levels of intimacy and lower levels of passion. Qualities like spending time together, security, and good communication are all valued higher in a love like this (Guerrero et. al. 196). Joe and Rosie convey this love because they are so comfortable with another. They have been married for years, have four adult kids together, and still have dinner together with the family every Sunday night. Joe drives Rosie to work everyday. They value those small things more so than the heavy passion that comes with some relationships. They are proud of their stability with little to no unpredictability. Their love tends to consist mainly of nonverbal cues. As much as Joe admits as a narrator that he loves and cherishes Rosie, he often does not express it in conventional ways. He expresses it by always attending Sunday dinner and driving her to work each morning with complaining about being late for his own job.

On the other hand, one of the O'Brien daughters, Katie, also begins to show love with her boyfriend, Felix. For the most part, their love is considered to be an Eros kind of

love. They are a new couple and full of adventure and exciting passion. Eros tends to be deemed the “passionate love.” Katie will sneak Felix in late at night and have him sneak out early in the morning so that no one will see him. Katie hides him from the family because she isn’t sure how they will react when they find out he is not catholic and not irish. In Eros, the couple involved tends to experience “intense emotional highs and lows” (Guerrero et. al. 196). This proves to be especially true as Katie learns of her father’s disease as well as her chance of inheriting it. She has to decide whether or not to explain this to Felix. Once she chooses to let him in a little more, their relationship remains high in Eros, but now Storge comes into play for them. They are more deeply entrenched in each others lives, and they are connected pass solely physical means.

When looking at the family as a whole, Agape love becomes more and more apparent as the novel continues. Agape love is defined as “compassionate love.” It is considered an unconditional love full of endurance and desire for the others well being (Guerrero et. al. 198). Reverting back to Rosie and Joe, their entire world is shattered upon Joe’s diagnosis. The life they have known and the life they have planned out is no longer an option. Everything has changed at this point, and they need to learn how to adapt. From Rosie’s point of view, it could very well be an option to leave the marriage. While they are not young, they are not past an age of remarriage. She could have easily admitted that she didn’t want to be a caretaker of a helpless man and that she desired a long-lasting marriage without medical complications. However, not once does she say anything along these lines. She constantly reassures Joe that everything is going to be okay and that they will figure out a new plan. She was the once who forced him to go to

the doctor to see what was wrong in the first place, and she reminds him often that she will be there throughout the entirety of this process. Her love exudes unconditionality. She would do anything for her husband. She would sacrifice anything. This is also a turning point for Joe in the novel. As previously mentioned, Joe has always struggled to convey his love for his wife and family in a traditional way. It is around this time Joe knows that he simply won't have the time to love his family and needs to completely embrace all he has left. He starts outwardly telling them he loves them, he sits them down for personal talks, and he wants to know what he can do to make their lives better. Additionally, their children also exhibit Agape love. They go through an immense struggle of dealing with their father's sickness while also contemplating their choice to know whether or not they also carry the disease. It would be easy for a family to break up in a time like this. While the kids obviously don't have the option of divorce, they could distance themselves from their parents and not confront the hardships that come with this disease. However, they all band together as a family and remain strong. They work hard everyday to be there for their father and not let their lives change too much. Their dad values stability, and they make sure to keep that a priority in their lives amidst so much change.

Part 3: Is it Sustainable?

In looking at the examples from the novel, the love between Joe and Rosie does appear sustainable. Rosie is completely dedicated to Joe and his health. While she knows it is deteriorating and there isn't much she can do about that, she still puts forth her best effort to keep Joe happy. In the book *The Super Couple* by Dr. Christine

Bacon, she differentiates between love as a feeling and love as a choice or an action. She explains that in the beginning stages of relationships, there is a certain “love cocktail” that tends to cloud peoples visions. This cocktail of crazy hormones causes someone to spend an inordinate amount of free time thinking about, talking to, and being with a specific person (Bacon 99). However, once this cocktail fades is when each person has to come to the conclusion that they either really love this person, or they have just been under the impression of love this entire time. The loving actions become the most important part of the relationship. The loving actions exhibit a choice, thus the partner is happier because they are being served (Bacon 106). This is all apparent in Rosie. She made a choice each and every day to love Joe unconditionally. She walked to work when he could no longer drive, she did not chastise him for not being able to complete simple tasks, she did things around the house that were normally reserved for Joe and never mentioned that she did them. A love like this is absolutely sustainable. This text does help clarify what true love is. For Rosie and Joe, it is a love rooted in a deep friendship that grew more as the years went on. Once tested at an incredibly high demand, it still grew. Dr. Scott Diering, an emergency room physician who wrote *Love Your Patients*, writes about his “big three” behaviors of love that are so important for people to develop. He centers on compassion, respect, and humility. In keeping these three at the forefront of one’s actions, one can show and feel agape love (qtd. in Sawin). Rosie works daily to convey her compassion for Joe by loving him endlessly. She respects him by never embarrassing him when he struggles to do simple things, and

she shows humility when she does not take credit for things she does around the house.

Part 4: Personal Experiences

Overall, I loved this book. It broke my heart 1000 times and mended it all at the same time. This book does show all aspects of love. When comparing it to my own life, I really see where parts of this book can be applied practically. Many couples struggle with medical issues, and the ones who chose to remain in love are the ones that are happier people. My aunt recently passed away, and she was ridden with health problems. Her husband essentially abandoned her, and he ended up an alcoholic because he was left alone. However, she spent the last month or so of her life relatively happy. She spent it surrounded by family she loved and family that loved her. While it was not easy, it is clear that love can be shaped into something that helps people heal from deaths.

As much as I want to say I have experienced a love like Rosie and Joe, I am simply too young with not enough life experience. I have a wonderful boyfriend who treats me better than I deserve. While we have Eros love, we are completely based in Storge. We were friends for years before we started dating, and it really shows in our relationship. No one makes me laugh like him, no one knows me exactly like he does, and I don't trust anyone the way I trust him. He truly is my best friend. Just this week I lost a ring he bought me for our two year anniversary. It was a promise ring and had a lot of meaning behind it. I was worried he was going to be furious and chastise me for being so careless. Instead, he understood how upset I was and would have never

thought to be mad at me. I hope and pray that in our future we can grown to have more of an agape love. I want to experience that. I want to be the giver and the receiver. While I hope to never go through hardships like Rosie and Joe, I am confident in my ability to overcome my innate selfishness as a human being and fully embrace the agape love that my spouse would deserve.

Works Cited

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