

Reading Group Guide for
Goodnight, Irene
by Jan Burke

Background notes:

Goodnight, Irene is Jan Burke's first novel.

The first line came to her in a smoky bar, where she and her husband had gone to see a friend's band play. She turned to her husband and said, "I just had a first line come to me, and if I don't make use of it, I'm going to stop saying that I'm going to write a book one day."

At the time, she was a manager of a manufacturing plant for a large corporation. She wrote *Goodnight, Irene* in the evenings after work and on weekends. She sold it unsolicited and unagented to Simon & Schuster. It received early special attention when President Bill Clinton mentioned he was reading it.

The book received both Agatha Award and Anthony Award nominations for Best First Novel. It was first published in 1993 and has not been out of print since.

It was optioned for television and has been published in Dutch, Japanese, German, French, Spanish, and other languages.

Review excerpts:

One of this year's top ten mysteries! A thumbs-up plot, involved but logically linked. Burke is a skillful pilot as she deftly moves her story forward, supplying plenty of no-holds-barred action and investigative ingenuity. 'Goodnight, Irene'? Welcome series!"

—Orange County Register

"Exciting debut mystery . . . she writes with remarkable sensitivity about the physical and spiritual reactions of people terrorized by cold-blooded killers."

—Publishers Weekly

"Goodnight, Irene is refreshingly free of the various affectations that afflict many who would follow where Raymond Chandler led. Kelly has a lot of appeal. . . a very promising debut."

—Associated Press

"Jan Burke's first novel is a well-crafted, entertaining book that bids fair to put her name up high on the list of hotly collected female mystery writers. Burke paces her story beautifully."

—Firsts

"Mysteries by female authors with female protagonists abound these days, and many are good. Burke's is one of the best. The plot is believable, the writing is excellent...."

—Columbia Missourian

"Burke is off to a very promising start. . . tense and explosive."

—Los Angeles Times

"[Starred review] Readers who want non-stop action, a diabolically clever plot and spare dialogue, and a heroine who's a combination of Nancy Drew, Katherine Hepburn, Lois Lane and Lauren Bacall should snap up Goodnight, Irene at the first opportunity."

—Booklist

"A powerful debut novel. Burke packs a lot of punch into Irene's tough-minded search for her friend's killer."

—Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine

Questions:

- 1) Jan Burke has said that when she wrote *Goodnight, Irene*, one of her goals in creating Irene Kelly was to portray a protagonist in a mystery who grieved the loss of the victim. In the mysteries she had read up to that time, she had not felt that the protagonists' emotional reactions to the murders of close friends rang true. At the same time, she did not want the reader to spend page after page with someone immobilized by grief. In what ways do we see Irene grieve O'Connor's death? Do you feel a balance was struck between an active protagonist and one who mourns a loss?
- 2) O'Connor is murdered early in the book — by the second sentence, the reader knows he is about to die. Yet some readers have said he is one of their favorite characters. How do we come to know O'Connor? Did you become attached to him?
- 3) At the time *Goodnight, Irene* was written, only a few women authors were depicting violence in crime novels. How has this changed? How do you feel about the violence in the book? About the characters reactions to the violence they experience?
- 4) Jan Burke has said that when she was writing the book, she had planned for Frank and Irene to be no more than friends, and resisted the idea of any romantic involvement, but "Frank and Irene insisted on getting together." Up until then, Frank was just going to be a standard mystery "file drawer" character — providing information from the police when needed by the amateur detective and then shoved back out of the story. Does their attraction to each other work for the story?
- 5) Who are your favorite secondary characters? Why? Which ones did you most dislike? Why?
- 6) Often the heroes of mysteries are loners, but Irene's life is complicated by her connections to others. If you prefer a loner protagonist, what appeals to you about such a character? In what ways is Irene's life more (or less) like your own?
- 7) Sometimes, we form closer, more family-like bonds with people to whom we are not related than we have with those to whom we are related to by blood. Who are some of the people in this book who serve as Irene's informal family? Do you have such connections in your own life?
- 8) Barbara is one of those people complicates Irene's life. Is Barbara more trouble than she's worth? What are some signs that these sisters may be closer than even they are aware?
- 9) Is Kenny victim or villain? Do you believe he will change?

10) What futures do you predict for the main characters?

11) Irene is investigating a cold case that involves a victim who might, by some, be seen as insignificant. In what ways does old violence have long-reaching implications in *Goodnight, Irene*? Do you believe violence in real life has the same impact?

12) When the book was being written, forensic science was not the hot topic it is now — *Goodnight, Irene* was published long before the first episode of *CSI* aired. What are some of the ways in which forensic science is used in the book?