

# A Penguin Readers Guide

## What They Wanted

About the Book 330

An Interview with Donna Morrissey 331

Discussion Questions 334



## ABOUT THE BOOK

*What They Wanted*, Donna Morrissey's fourth novel, is set in two very different yet similarly severe environments: the depleted, sea-battered outport of Hampden, Newfoundland, and the nightmarish atmosphere of an Alberta oil rig. While vividly revealing the hardship and beauty of these worlds, Morrissey explores how members of the Now family (first introduced in her award-winning book *Sylvanus Now*) grapple with notions of home, love, regret, and forgiveness.

Sylvie Now, the novel's narrator, returns to Newfoundland to visit her father, Sylvanus, in the hospital after he suffers a heart attack. Having left their small, struggling outport a few years before to study in St. John's and then to work as a waitress in oil-rich Alberta, Sylvie has no idea what to expect.

She's not sure how long she'll stay, and she doesn't know what it will feel like to be back in the house of her mother, Adelaide, a house that while Sylvie was growing up—despite being surrounded by her beloved brothers, Gran, and father—never quite felt like home.

In a story that spans two decades, Sylvie details life growing up in the Now household—her deep connection to her father, her mother's estrangement, a past haunted by the “three little dears” who died before Sylvie's birth, and her own childhood fascination with the dead and their spirits—as well as the emotionally complex adventure she undertakes with her brother Chris.

At the hospital in Corner Brook where Sylvanus is being treated, it quickly becomes clear that his physical condition will make it impossible for him to work and support his family. But Sylvie is paid handsomely by the men working in the booming oil industry, and she knows she can send enough money home to look after her family. The middle child, Chris, a dreamy, talented artist, also knows that fast money can be made on the oil rigs, and for reasons of pride and guilt, he secretly decides to accompany his sister when she heads back.

Sylvie has always encouraged Chris to leave Hampden to pursue his artistic career—much to the dismay of their mother, who dotes on her son—but even she questions his decision to travel west. Oil rigs are dangerous places, and Sylvie worries about her brother. This concern increases when they arrive in camp, and Sylvie's long-

time love interest, Ben, a troubled man with his own secrets, has already secured Chris a job as a roustabout on a rig.

Quitting her bar job in Grande Prairie, Sylvie begins work as a cook on the oil rig where Chris, Ben, and another man from their childhood—the nefarious Trapp—are employed. It’s an unearthly environment of unrelenting noise and tension, and the experience ends in a tragedy that ultimately offers opportunity for understanding and hope. As with all of Morrissey’s books, this story is an emotional odyssey in which the characters struggle with unresolved conflicts and desires and the questions that arise from displacement. <sup>n</sup>

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DONNA MORRISSEY

- Q • You’ve mentioned that *What They Wanted* was supposed to have been a part of *Sylvanus Now*. What made you decide to tell the stories separately? How did you know that this narrative needed to be its own entity?

*Sylvanus Now* became a more in-depth story than I originally thought. I hadn’t planned on delving so deeply into Addie’s depression or the plight of the fishing industry. But as I got deeper into the book, I realized Addie needed her own story told from the inside out, and most certainly, Sylvanus and his struggle with the declining fishing industry demanded more than part of a book. Alas, we have to go where the story takes us. <sup>n</sup>

- Q • One review of the book mentioned that you wrote the first draft in third person. What compelled you to change the point of view to first person? How is the story made stronger by telling it from Sylvie’s perspective?

*What They Wanted* is based on the true-life experience of my brother and me. It was very difficult to stand outside the story and see it objectively. Writing it in the third person gave me the emotional distance I needed. Once I was able to see the story objectively, I went back to page one and told it from the first person.

Given that it is such a personal story for me, telling it through Sylvie's eyes was the best means by which I could get close to the bone, to really bring the reader into her psyche and understand her. Plus, given that it is largely my story, I couldn't imagine anyone else telling it besides Sylvie. <sup>n</sup>

- Q • How did the process of writing this book compare with writing your others? Was telling the difficult story of your experience in Alberta more challenging? More meaningful?

This is certainly the most difficult book I've written, simply because of the emotional investment it demanded. I was very tight-chested writing it ... it resurrected emotion in me that I had long since buried. But I knew this would happen ... it's why I waited such a long time to write it. Certainly it is the most meaningful of my stories. Thus far ... <sup>n</sup>

- Q • Did you ever consider writing a non-fiction book about your experiences on the oil rig? Is fiction always your vehicle for storytelling?

Naw, I could never write non-fiction. I like the creative energy ... I like the suspense of where fiction is going to take me. It is the only creative outlet for me. I can't do anything else, except weed gardens. Love doing that. <sup>n</sup>

- Q • Sound plays an integral role in this book. For example, Sylvie seems to hear the sea in her father's chest when she first visits him in the hospital. The morning she leaves for Alberta, she recognizes the first sounds she must have heard: gulls, ocean waves, sounders. And in Alberta, the unremitting roar of the rig, Cook's rattling cough. Do you pay particular attention to sound when you're writing a scene?

I pay attention to all of the senses when I'm writing. I close my eyes, and I try to see, feel, hear, smell what a setting brings. It's critical for bringing a reader into the setting of a story. It's a critical tool for me—writing through the senses—for it helps me define the tone and mood of each scene; it helps me to present the personality of my characters, their mood. <sup>n</sup>

- Q • At the end of the book, Adelaide says in conversation with Sylvie, “Perhaps accidents are the way of life, and it’s for us to bring them meaning.” Are your books ways of bringing meaning to the accidents?

Writing for me is a way of understanding life. It helps me delve deeper into character and learn the psychology of that character, to understand the archetypes reigning within us. It pushes me to learn from the old philosophers, history. There’s much that I learn in looking for a character or setting or in psychological behaviours that never makes its way into the book. I love researching, but most of it never reaches the page or else it gets edited out before the book is printed. <sup>n</sup>

- Q • Did you find it necessary to travel back to Alberta while writing the book? Were there parts of the story that required further research?

No, I didn’t have to travel back to Alberta ... at least, not the rigs. I remember them as though it were yesterday. Those things I didn’t know—the inner workings of the rig—I learned from several rough-necks who gave me their time. Google is also a writer’s best friend—gawd, it was tedious learning the parts of a rig and how they all fitted together. And then in the end, as I already said, most everything I sweated over understanding got edited out. <sup>n</sup>

- Q • Do you read for inspiration? What kinds of stories do you find yourself drawn to?

I read all the time. I read the classics, I read psychology, philosophy, ancient history, space stuff ... I go through stages where all I want to do is read, when I want for nothing but to be a student. But then my bank account signals, and I gotta go to work. <sup>n</sup>

**Q:** What are you working on now?

I've recently started a new novel. It opens in the town of Stevenville in Newfoundland (surprise, surprise) but then migrates to Halifax. And that's all I want to say about that ... Did I just quote Forrest Gump??? <sup>n</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Morrissey chose the title *What They Wanted*? How does "want" play a pivotal role in the book?
2. How does Sylvie and Chris's relationship change throughout the novel? Does their interaction in Alberta differ from their interaction in Newfoundland?
3. If not for his father's heart attack and his guilt about losing the boat, do you think Chris would have left Newfoundland?
4. The night before Sylvie and Chris travel to Alberta, Sylvie asks Gran why everyone gets so upset when someone leaves the bay, and Gran answers, "From the way we used to live, I suppose. All by ourselves, getting what we wants from the other. When somebody leaves then, we feels crippled." Yet, in the same conversation Gran declares, "But you got to go." Why do you think Gran feels they must go?
5. How did you respond to Chris's drawings? What did they tell you about him?
6. The only time Sylvie sees fear in her father's eyes is when he imagines being forced to leave the bay. Where do you think this fear comes from? Do you think he felt fear when Chris and Sylvie left?

7. Why do ghosts, spirits, and shadows populate this book? What do you think Morrissey is saying about memory? About what it means to be haunted?
8. As a girl, Sylvie often hid in a closet near the porch hoping to see one of the ghosts in the walls. After Chris's fatal accident, Sylvie hides once more in a closet in her hotel room. Why do you think she does this? And what finally changes inside her to allow her to leave that dark hiding space?
9. We get to know Trapp only through other characters' perceptions of him. He is a character who haunts the book from beginning to end, but we never know exactly what he's thinking. Why do you think Morrissey decided to present Trapp in this way?
10. Do you think that Sylvie eventually comes to understand Ben's need to look after Trapp? Why do you think she initially rails against it so vehemently? What does it reveal about her own feelings regarding freedom and responsibility?
11. At one point in the novel Sylvie says, "No matter whose table I was sitting at, or how sweet the jam, it always felt like I was just halfway home." The book begins with the Now home being literally split in two. Does Morrissey offer a definition of home? What do you think home means to Sylvie? Does this change throughout the book?