



## The O'Briens

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*The O'Brien's* follows the family from *The Law of Dreams* two generations later: Joe O'Brien is coming of age in a new century in remote Pontiac County, Quebec, with his brothers and sisters by his side.

Their father has abandoned the family and died in the South African war; their frail mother has remarried the abusive and lecherous Mick Heaney. Joe and his siblings escape the poverty and violence of the Pontiac, but as Joe travels the continent, building an empire and a bright young family with his wife, Iseult, he is never quite able to leave his past behind.

Told from the perspectives of Joe, Iseult, and their children and spanning the construction of the Canadian railroad as well as both world wars, this novel mirrors the scope and sweep of what Wilfrid Laurier calls "Canada's Century." Tragic, romantic, and as vivid as the novel that preceded it, *The O'Brien's* is an epic of great heart, imagination, and narrative force.

## **The O'Briens Details**

Date : Published 2011 by House of Anansi Press (first published January 1st 2008)

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Author : Peter Behrens

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## From Reader Review The O'Briens for online ebook

### **Sarah says**

A really well done family saga is hard to find and must be hard to write. This one comes close, but in the end misses the mark. With that said, there is still enough here to make some honest recommendations to historical literary fiction readers.

I've been thinking a lot about characters lately and what makes or breaks a character. It isn't that you want to hang out with them, or that you always identify with them. But there has to be enough meat of the character to sympathize with them and find them believable. A well drawn character should carry you away - Mellas from Matterhorn is a great recent example.

Here the characters were too slippery - I craved more of Joe's story especially in the early years but even later his insight is given up to Iseult and his children.

There are good bits here - the birth of the first child at the railroad camp, the brother's experiences in WWI, and the funeral at then end (just for example - it's a long book) are all well written and moving. Overall it just didn't come together in a completely satisfactory way.

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### **Allen Adams says**

<http://www.themaineedge.com/buzz/the-...>

This is a saga that warrants your attention. This is a story whose quiet brilliance can't be ignored. It's an intimate epic, if that makes sense – a portrait of an entire world through the lens of a single bloodline. All the joy and passion, all the anger and fear, all the love and loss involved in simply living and being – that's what Peter Behrens has captured with "The O'Briens."

The story of the O'Brien family would make for wonderful reading in any context, but Behrens does his readers a great service by tapping into a deep knowledge of (and obvious love for) Canada and its provinces. While the entire book is a deeply engaging read, Behrens shines his brightest when describing the swath-cutting through western Canada, the ramshackle stolidity of Pontiac County or the beauty of early 20th century Montreal. In "The O'Briens," the power of people and the power of place are irrevocably intertwined.

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### **Mary Alaga says**

All I can say is, I'm glad I wasn't depressed when I read this. The story spans 60 years and in all that time, Joe and Isult can count, on one hand, how many times they enjoyed their life together. Isult seems to spend her time wondering if she should have married Joe, and Joe seems to plug along, being successful in business and that's all.

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### **Amy says**

Couldn't wait for it to be over. Found it read like an expensive meal where your still hungry afterwards. Invested in the characters, but not enough real meat to satiate. Kept waiting for something to happen. Spoiler alert...it never does!

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### **Cheri says**

Epic family story spanning from pre-turn-of-the-century to the 1960s, Peter Behrens tells not only the story of The O'Briens, but the story of America and the changes both endure through those ages. Beautifully written, Behrens digs deep into the heart and soul of each character.

"Frankie wondered if what she was feeling could be called grief. People would say it was, of course they would, but it was hard to collate her feelings into a single noun. Grief suggested a stately music that her feelings entirely lacked. They were as squalid and messy as dirty sheets in a room reeking of last night's cigarette smoke. Her grief was charred with resentment and tasted foul."

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### **Bobby says**

Wonderfully paced fictional family ,the Obrien's, from late 1800's to 1960's. Moves along at a perfect pace with the main charcter, Joe Obrien, sometimes taking a backseat while other family members' stories are told. Good depiction of the various time periods, esp. WW I and WW II. Only complaint is a great deal of phrases in French and not always a translation. Not sure if it was to add authenticity or not but my limited French had me wondering at times if I was missing something crucial to the story. This is well worth your while and you will be kept busy turning the pages.

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### **Patty says**

I've read great family sagas, and this one isn't one of them. It is cumbersome and follows a worn out model. Poor wretch makes it big in the world, everyone comes to hate him including his family. Industrial giant misunderstood and maligned by those he has vowed to love and save. Unclear ending in the fog and the whole book left me in a fog.

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### **RoseMary Achey says**

This novel follows three generations of an Irish Catholic Canadian family. When Joe O'Brien's father dies he assumes responsibility for his mother and four brothers and sisters at the age of 14. Joe protects and cares for his family and dreams of a future beyond the rugged Canadian wilderness. Joe has a keen sense of business and does build a thriving commercial construction concern. This portion of the book is by far the best. The next generation-Joe's three children and their lives were not as well developed and felt rushed. Overall a good book.

## **Jill says**

Writing a saga that spans 70 years is not the easiest thing in the world. There's always a balancing act: how much "play" to give each of the many characters, what events to spotlight, how to believably depict the changing of time.

Peter Behrens, fortunately, is a word craftsman and, in elegant and cinematic language, captures the agony and the ecstasy, the fortune of loss of the O'Brien family. We meet eventual patriarch Joe O'Brien early on, in Pontiac County, Quebec. His father has died at war, his mother is on her deathbed, and a lecherous and drunken stepfather torments his sisters. With the assistance of a priest, three of the five siblings are claimed and cloistered by the church. One brother, Grattan, moves to California; on a visit there, Joe meets his wife Iseult, a strong-willed and independent woman with her own gritty back-story.

Moving seamlessly between Canada and Venice Beach, California, from 1880 to two world wars to right before Kennedy's emergence, we travel with the author from Santa Barbara to coastal Maine to Montreal, as children and then grandchildren arrive on the scene. We explore the raw and often rocky marriage of Joe and Iseult – its separation, longing, desires, and coldness and its temptations from outside forces.

To get more precise about the developments that follow would be to create spoilers. Suffice to say that Behrens – who previously wrote screenplays in California – is a master at rich descriptions, lyrical rhythms, and clean, vibrant sentences.

But it is precisely this exactitude that left me feeling unsatisfied. I can easily see *The O'Briens* become a compulsively-watch ministry; it's filled with historical relevance, often bigger-than-life characters, and sheer human emotion. I often felt, though, that the characters and dialogue were too scripted. Here, for example, is Joe speaking to Iseult during one marital crisis: "I want to get away, Iseult. The two of us. I was thinking we might go back up to those mountains. We left some happiness up there, Iseult, did we not?" Or another, between the two brothers: "Perhaps I'm one of the fianna... Old Irish for the warrior race. You can't put a square peg in a round hole. The fact is, there's a war on and I'm going back across to take up the fight."

Despite often searing images, I tend to default to authentic characters and dialogue. I found myself somehow wanting more.

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## **Paula says**

3.5 stars - I really enjoyed this epic Canadian novel about a young Irish Canadian who makes a good life for himself and his family through hard work and dedication. A part of the story is about the building of the railroad in British Columbia and the very tough circumstances encountered. The story takes the reader from the 1880's in Quebec through the two world wars and into the sixties.

I am about to start reading the prequel, *The Law of Dreams*, about the O'Brien family immigration to Canada from Ireland which won the GG award in 2006.

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## Bonnie Brody says

The O'Briens is a family saga that extends from 1887 through 1960 covering three generations of the O'Brien family. As the novel starts, Joe O'Brien is a second generation Irishman living in rural Canada with his mother and drunken stepfather. Joe has served as a parental child since his earliest years, taking care of his siblings due to his mother's fragile state of health and his desire to keep his brothers and sisters protected from his stepfather. At one point, when he finds out that his stepfather has been acting inappropriately with his sisters, he nearly kills him.

Joe is the patriarch of the family throughout this novel. "He knew how to hold himself within himself. A fellow needed a good hard shell to survive." Joe has this shell along with the desire to better himself. He wants power, money and a well-bred wife. His first chore is to see that his siblings are taken care of. He sees that one of his brothers is enrolled at Fordham to become a priest, his two sisters enter a convent to prepare for the nunnery, and his other brother travels west.

Joe has grown up on the railroads and he knows how the system works. He wants to become a railroad magnate and by the time he's in his early twenties, he has succeeded. He now only needs a wife. "A house was just a house. He had a railroad, mountains. He was making something of himself." "Alone was no good". He meets Iseult, a young woman of independent means and quite spirited. They begin a passionate and lifelong ambivalent relationship, marrying a few months after meeting. Iseult is searching for herself but also also wants family and children.

Gradually, Joe's business increases to the point that he becomes very rich. His prime interest is his business. "All that mattered to him was getting the work completed and on schedule. It didn't matter who survived or who didn't." He runs into some problems with unions but he prevails. Iseult, in her existential angst, thinks of Joe, her husband as the man who once "promised life, connection, children, meaning. But really, people were alone. Even in marriage - perhaps most of all in marriage - they were alone.

Joe and Iseult have four children, three daughters and a son. One of the daughters dies after living only two days. The O'Briens have homes in Canada, Santa Barbara, and Maine. Joe owns land up and down the west coast. As the book propels towards World War II, the children grow up and the war plays a large part in the novel.

One of the problems with this novel, and it is a good novel, is that it is just too short at 386 pages to cover so much time and inform the reader about all of the family members. The reader becomes very familiar with Joe, Iseult, Joe's brother Grattan, and the first generation to some extent. However, the grandchildren are just glossed over.

One of the most poignant parts of the novel are Joe's alcohol binges that nearly bring the marriage to an end. Every so often, Joe leaves his home and goes to New York City where he takes a room at some luxury hotel. There he stays and drinks for days until Iseult is called and asked to pick Joe up. At one point, Iseult leaves Joe and takes the children to Santa Barbara where she and Joe remain separated for nearly a year. Joe continues to binge but it is never discussed between them again.

Another very significant aspect of this novel is the acknowledgement of post-traumatic stress disorder although it is never given a name. Grattan returns from World War I a changed man, virtually crazy and wild. He has been in the trenches but he does not speak of what he has experienced. A similar situation occurs with Joe and Iseult's son Mike after he returns injured from World War II. He has lost his health, his love and his grounding in the world.

Iseult's ambivalence about Joe occurs throughout their marriage. She states that Joe "had occupied her life

like a foreign army. But was that really true? Wasn't it just as true that they has created a life together?" Joe, on the other hand, has implacable faith in himself to the point of narcissism. He takes it for granted that his life with Iseult is a necessity and that he needs her to make a home. "Selfish, Frankie thought. Hard-hearted. Her mother needed him, but he as usual was thinking of no one but himself."

The saga is quite interesting but at times I felt like I was just skimming the surface. The depths were too deep and too many to touch in this too short a book. Perhaps if it were 800 pages, the characters could have been more fleshed out. Another possibility would have been to limit the novel to just two generations and leave the third one out. Personally, I would have liked this to have been two books.

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### **Steven Buechler says**

A wonderful epic. It kept me glued all weekend long.

-page 372

"They shared a double bed on that train, his body heat provoking a mash of feelings in her, mostly anger, resentment. He was trying to annihilate her. Putting on a wrapper, she spent the first night and most of the next in the lounge car in an armchair, reading *The Good Earth*. They took meals in the dining car and she brought the novel to the table. Joe gazed out at the long yellow agricultural valleys of Oregon and Washington, where he owned land. Every now and then she looked up from the book and their eyes met. The sight of middle-aged couples with nothing to say to one another had always depressed her horribly, and that was what they had become. Her thoughts, furious and confused, circled Krishnaji like birds fluttering around a perch.

She finished the novel in the Seattle train station. Joe picked up a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and on the way up to Vancouver she read about Japanese solders rampaging in Manchuria. Four hours later, as the the train slid through the Vancouver yards, she saw strings of boxcars sitting idly on sidings, tramps in every open doorway, legs dangling, and dozens of me and boys with bedrolls and haversacks slung over their shoulders, tramping along shining tracks in silver rain.

The last time they had been in Vancouver was in 1914, on their way up to the contract. In those days she and Joe O'Brien had shared a seamless will and one set of longings, but it wasn't like that anymore."

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### **Raimo Wirkkala says**

This is a family saga with a sweep of just over 60 years, spanning the first half of the 20th century. It moves briskly and I found it impossible to put down for the last 150 pages or so. Behrens does much better with character development here than he did with his first novel, "*The Law of Dreams*". The female characters, in particular, fare better this time. You may not like the main character, Joe O'Brien, but by the end of the novel you will respect him.

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### **Ann says**

I liked the characters and their stories the further along in the book I read. I normally finish a book in spite of not liking, however in this case I gave up at 67%. I just don't care how it ends.

## Kathy says

This book was a disappointment to me. I felt none of the characters were developed, it jumped so many years ahead it was as if the people had no life for a 20 year period. It took me over 3 weeks to get through it and it was one of those things where you keep thinking this story has to take hold any page now. It never gripped me and was boring to the very last page. It is a 2012 Great Group Reads, but it doesn't seem like it has much of a story for a book club. Thumbs down from me.

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## Julie Christine says

It would seem the greater the sweep of history encompassed by a novel, the more confined the writer. The facts of history are many and easily called out, the settings, characters and dialogue are well-defined by their eras and the more years a story covers, the shallower the characters can become as they are stretched and diluted by time.

It is, therefore, deeply satisfying to read a saga as intimate and profound as *The O'Briens*. Peter Behrens is a master of the art of storytelling. He understands the fine balance between enchanting prose and compelling facts.

*The O'Briens* begins deep in the pine forests of northern Quebec in 1887 and ends in a dinghy just off the Cape Breton coast in 1960. It follows the fortunes and tragedies of Joe O'Brien, the eldest of five siblings who lose first their father to the Boer War, then their mother to despair and disease. Joe, although taciturn and moody, is a natural leader with an affinity for numbers and an ambition that he uses to propel himself and his siblings out of Canada's back country when he is barely a teenager. Fans of Peter Behrens will recognize the O'Brien determination from the author's previous novel *Law of Dreams*, which tells the story of Joe's grandfather, Fergus O'Brien, who escaped the famine in Ireland to immigrate to Canada two generations earlier.

Joe rushes across North America, from the forests of British Columbia to the beaches of Southern California and down to Mexico, building a fortune in railroad construction. In 1912, at a quiet real estate office in Venice Beach, Joe encounters a young French-American woman, Iseult Wilkins. Iseult has just buried her mother and she too is an orphan, as restless as Joe, yet constrained by her gender and limited financial resources.

Passion and recognition of kindred spirits bring Joe and Iseult to an altar within weeks of their first meeting. It is in depicting this marriage, an invisible ribbon that shreds to a breaking point by years of betrayal and grief and is reknotted each time by tenderness and love, that Behrens reveals some of his greatest strengths as a writer. We come to know Joe and Iseult as much as they allow us to, their voices ringing true as they falter and succumb to their own vanities.

Other characters, such as Joe's brother Grattan, his daughters Frankie and Margo and son Mike, are no less vivid for playing secondary roles. Their stories bring us directly into the emotional devastation of the men who fought in World War I and World War II and of the families left behind, waiting for the worst news.

Behrens is an atmospheric writer. His settings are vivid, his characters feel and react with tremendous emotion, his prose is rich and lambent. Yet his pacing is precise and brisk. He has such a great span of time

to cover - one with numerous world-changing events - but he selects the most pivotal and delves deeply, showing his characters' development by how they respond to their circumstances.

It was a difficult book to set aside each evening when I knew I had to stock up on sleep; I found myself longing for the free afternoon and early morning late in the week when I could be enfolded by Behrens's story. This is a luminous read.

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### **Steven Langdon says**

I was very much looking forward to reading this new Peter Behrens novel, "The O'Briens," and it did turn out to be one of those family saga books that I enjoy, tracing the life of Joe O'Brien, his brothers (Grattan and Tom,) and Joe's family over the almost 70 years. Behrens writes well, and his descriptions of the Ottawa Valley, the New York of 1910, the B.C. mountain passes, the California coast and urbanizing Montreal are vivid and clear. On balance, though, the novel left me somewhat let-down -- the character of Joe never really lives with depth and texture for me, nor does Joe's relationship with his wife receive the sensitive probing that their continuing tensions seem to merit. The ties between Joe and Grattan are agonized and difficult, and traced effectively for a time, but then sudden left aside in Grattan's final years (a gap that is hard to understand.)

One of the books I enjoyed in 2011 was "The Free World" -- another family saga -- and this novel was far less gripping and powerful than that book. So a good read, but not as fine as I expected . . .

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### **Caitlin says**

I'm surprised I actually finished this book. I didn't feel like I connected with any of the characters. all of the compelling storylines were never fleshed out. Why was isault in love with the yogi? I didn't even know how she felt about joe going off on benders until she up and left him. Was margot a raving alcoholic? What happened between grattan and his wife? What was she going thru when grattan was off doing whatever? by the end I just wanted to be done with it.

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### **Lorna Driscoll says**

man oh man.....why do people write 500 pages of such rambling drivel.....(and why did I stick it out?) I guess I thought it might get better at the end, but it got worse! And all this from an author who was a GG award winner. I don't get it! What am I missing?

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### **Amanda says**

Well - that was disappointing. What started out as a great premise with a couple of very strong characters seemed to peter out to loosely (or not at all, in some cases) vignettes in the life of some members of this family. Scenes which may have been important vanished into the text with no follow-up, as did some of the characters. The ones we were left with were sketchy, to say the least, with little indication given to their motivation or reasoning.

I think this could have been a great book - just needed lots more flesh.

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