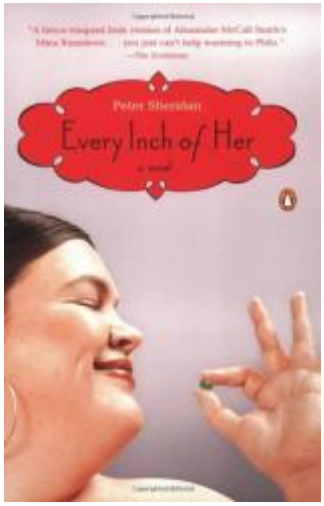
Every Inch of Her

by Peter Sheridan



About the Book

Philomena Nolan is a force to be reckoned with. At five foot six and two hundred forty pounds, her size alone is intimidating. But it is the power of her personality, with her brazen humor and no-nonsense attitude, that really gets people's attention. So how does a woman who appears so strong find herself at the door of the Good Shepherd's convent one night, seeking refuge?

"I feel like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*," Philomena says to Sister Rosaleen, who is eyeing Philo with trepidation. Philomena has always used humor as both a weapon and a shield, and she needs her armor now-she's never felt quite as vulnerable as she does at this moment. But how far can her humor take her this time? Can it get her past the fact that she's walked away from her family, including her five children, hoping for a better life for them all?

Sister Rosaleen does open the door for Philo. She has no idea at the time, however, how Philo will change her life, opening her eyes to a world beyond the church. In fact, because of Philo's insistence on embracing life and moving forward, she has an impact on every individual she meets: Cap and Dina, after feuding for forty years, finally make peace and come together; the once-complacent seniors at the convent's Day Centre are now alive with song and conversation; and the men in her life, who up till now have failed her miserably, all discover there's a price to pay for not treating people with the respect and dignity they deserve. Shaped by the hard-learned lessons of her difficult life, Philo has no time for gossip or greed, regret or self-pity, and won't stand for it in others either.

Through this remarkable character, Peter Sheridan, a well-known memoirist and one of the best-known figures in Irish contemporary theater, explores with humor, poignancy, and light some very dark issues, including domestic violence and sexual abuse, as well as the universal themes of family, love, and forgiveness, all against the backdrop he knows best-Dublin, Ireland. As we travel with Philo on her journey toward redemption, we are reminded that she is indeed extraordinary, but that most of all she is human, with frailties as well as strengths. The way she overcomes her weaknesses is her triumph. The way she sheds pounds along with the demons of her past to gain back her family, her dignity, her life, and her future is our inspiration.

Discussion Guide

1. What do you think of Philo's decision to abandon her children, as she later admits she's done? What are the circumstances, if any, that make giving up your children, if only temporarily, an acceptable option? When Philo tries to explain to her mother, Sylvia, her reasons for leaving the children, Philo says, "I have peace of mind. That counts for something." "Others are suffering for your peace of mind," her mother answers (page

183). How do we make the distinction between selfishness and the right to take care of our own needs, even when it means adversely affecting others, including our own children? Is it necessary sometimes to sacrifice a piece of our own happiness for the sake of those we love?

2. At first, Philo seems to fit the stereotype of an obese person: she's funny, brazen, and not all that sophisticated. We soon begin to see, however, that her weight is actually a defense against a lot of pain. What is the image of "fat" or obese people in our society today, and has it changed over the years? What is the relationship between our body image and our self-image?

3. Peter Sheridan deals with the issue of regret in a very powerful way, especially with the scenario between Cap and Dina. It is an amazing feat that Cap is actually able to right the wrongs of his past and finally get what he's always wanted, which is to be with Dina. Pop psychology usually tells us not to look back, that it only makes us unhappy. Is regret always a destructive force, or could it be a constructive one as well? How much time, if any, do you spend looking back and thinking "if I had only _____-ed"? Is there anything you would like to or could do now to change a piece of your history?

4. "Not only had Philo married her father, she was becoming her mother," the author writes on page 88. Why do we seem to repeat the mistakes of our parents? And is there any way for us to avoid this, or is it an inevitable part of life?

5. Cap and Gerry's friendship ended in 1951, when the Dublin docks erupted into a full-scale war, and the scabs or "aquanauts" were targeted by angry dockers. Cap and Gerry ended up being on opposite sides of this conflict. Should Cap have supported Gerry (page 33) out of loyalty to their friendship? Perhaps more important, do you think Cap regrets not having supported him, right or wrong as it might have been? How would things have turned out differently if Cap had raised his hand that evening? On page 34 Gerry asks Cap, "Why did you do it?" "I'm a coward, that's why," Cap answers. Is this true? Does Cap even believe this himself? How has Cap changed by the end of the novel?

6. It is quite ironic that Dina and Gerry stayed together only because of their mutual hatred of Cap (page 36), but it's the truth that sometimes seemingly incompatible people are drawn together because of a shared enmity toward an external figure. Have you seen this pattern in other novels? in your own life? in the world of politics?

7. Food is an important theme in **Every Inch of Her**: Cap and Dina own competing vegetable shops, Cap brings Dina licorice allsorts for a present, Philo brings assorted candies to her children, Philo uses food to sleep and for comfort, Philo thinks of each of her children as a corresponding food, to name just a few examples. What is the significance of food in your own life, the life of your family, your family traditions?

8. The power of words and the power of silence are themes that come up over and over again in the novel. That Tommo's verbal abuse of Philo is more hurtful to her than the physical abuse is in a way surprising ("She just never wanted to be called a fat cunt again," page 98). Do you think a lot of verbal abuse goes on unacknowledged? Do we underestimate the power of words to do harm, as well as good? On page 90, the author writes, "When Tommo erupted, Philo took her dose of digs with dignity and in silence. Because of that, he couldn't seem to keep it up for very long. It protected the children better, too. . . . Dignity and silence. The two words that kept the family together." Then, after Philo has taken her revenge on Sam, Sheridan writes, "She'd stripped him of his power. She'd broken the silence." (page 287). Discuss the way silence may be both a destructive force as well as a necessary component in keeping a family together.

9. Do you think **Every Inch of Her** could be set anywhere, in an American city for instance, or is it a uniquely Irish story?

10. On page 90 when Philo learns the devastating news that her son Jack has been arrested for joyriding, she thinks, "Children were supposed to be innocent, but hers were corrupted." By the end of the novel, Jack seems to be on the right track, and Philo is able to reconnect with her children. What do you think the fate of her children will be? Do you think Philo is finally happy with her life and herself?

Author Bio

Peter Sheridan is the author of **44: Dublin Made Me** and **47 Roses**. A leading figure in Irish theater, he has served as director of numerous acclaimed theaters in the U.S. and U.K. He is the director of the film *Borstal Boy*.

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