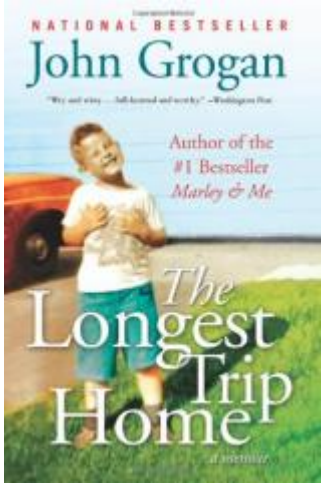
The Longest Trip Home: A Memoir

by John Grogan



About the Book

Finding your place in the world can be the longest trip home . . . In his debut bestseller, **Marley & Me**, John Grogan showed how a dog can become an extraordinary presence in the life of one family. Now, in his highly anticipated follow-up, Grogan again works his magic, bringing us the story of what came first.

Before there was Marley, there was a gleefully mischievous boy growing up in a devout Catholic home outside Detroit in the 1960s and '70s. Despite his loving parents' best efforts, John's attempts to meet their expectations failed spectacularly. Whether it was his disastrous first confession, the use of his hobby telescope to take in the bronzed Mrs. Selahowski sunbathing next door, the purloined swigs of sacramental wine, or, as he got older, the fumbled attempts to sneak contraband past his father and score with girls beneath his mother's vigilant radar, John was figuring out that the faith and fervor that came so effortlessly to his parents somehow had eluded him.

And then one day, a strong-willed young woman named Jenny walked into his life. As their love grew, John began the painful, funny, and poignant journey into adulthood --- away from his parents' orbit and into a life of his own. It would take a fateful call and the onset of illness to lead him on the final leg of his journey --- the trip home again.

The Longest Trip Home is a book for any son or daughter who has sought to forge an identity at odds with their parents', and for every parent who has struggled to understand the values of their children. It is a book about mortality and grace, spirit and faith, and the powerful love of family. With his trademark blend of humor and pathos that made **Marley & Me** beloved by millions, John Grogan traces the universal journey each of us must take to find our unique place in the world.

Filled with revelation and laugh-out-loud humor, **The Longest Trip Home** will capture your heart --- but mostly it will make you want to reach out to those you love.

***If your book club is reading *The Longest Trip Home* and you are interested in setting up a live phone chat with the author, click here for more information.**

Discussion Guide

1. John Grogan's parents were devout Catholics. How did their faith impact John? How did his struggle with his parents' Catholicism shape his way of dealing with life --- and death, most notably when his father was dying?

2. What kind of household were you raised in? How did your parents' faith --- or lack of it --- influence your

life?

3. Discuss John's relationship with his parents. Could you have been as accepting as his parents were during his adolescence? If you are a parent, talk about your relationship with your own children. If not, what kind of parent do you think you'd be?

4. What is the role of parents in children's lives? Do you think this role has changed from what it was in the 1960s and 1970s when John Grogan was a boy?

5. In your opinion, what were the most important lessons John learned from his parents?

6. Grogan had to separate from his parents to find his way back to them and back home. Do you think his is a common experience?

7. What role did meeting Jenny play in John's transformation? How did John and Jenny's relationship compare to that of John's parents?

8. Becoming a parent himself was a motivating element in his journey. Can someone truly understand their parents if they remain childless?

9. It is often said that we "become" our parents as we age. How does John resemble his parents? How have his experiences made him different?

10. At the end of the book, when John is visiting his mother, she tells him, "Once they leave home, that's it. They come back to visit, but it's never the same." John wants to protest but acknowledges that she is right. Do you agree? Why is it "never the same?"

11. Doris Kearns Goodwin praises **The Longest Trip Home**: "Every now and then a memoir is so well written that readers are able to find elements of their own life story in the chronicle of the writer's life." Do you agree? If so, what elements of your own life did you discover while reading?

12. A baby boomer born into a solidly middle class Midwestern household, John Grogan came from a very traditional American family. How might his story compare to others from different backgrounds? Can someone from another background --- say the child of a single mother growing up in a large city --- relate to his story? Why or why not?

13. Talk about John at the various stages of his life. How are you similar and different from your younger self?

14. Did **The Longest Trip Home** affect the way you see your own childhood and family?

15. John Grogan writes openly and guilelessly about some very painful and deeply personal moments in his life. He also speaks freely of the mischievous and sometimes devious adolescent that he was. If you were to write your own memoir, how honest could you be? Do you think you could face and expose your weaknesses and strengths the way he did?

16. Do you think writers like John Grogan see the world differently, or more clearly, than other people?

17. John meets a Catholic priest who tells him he "was a fan of what I did for a living, of using words to reach out to a larger community. As he put it in one e-mail, ‘Just remember: Jesus's favorite and most frequent way of teaching was telling stories. Is it any surprise that as things have come and gone with the passage of time, storytelling remains? It is part and parcel of what makes us human --- and puts us in touch with our humanity.' He called my writing my ‘ministry' and added, ‘In your own way John, you are doing God's work.'" What do you think about this?

18. In his memoir, John Grogan touches on the themes of morality and grace, spirit and faith, and the powerful love of family. How are these demonstrated? Give some examples of each.

19. Speaking of the themes above, how does memoir differ from fiction in conveying universal truths about the human condition? Do you think the message is stronger or more indelible when it is transmitted through a memoir rather than a novel?

20. If you've read John Grogan's previous book, **Marley & Me**, how does it compare with **The Longest Trip Home**? Are the tales similar? Do you see a connection between the two?

Author Bio

I was born in the Motor City, Detroit, Michigan, on March 20, 1957. My very Catholic parents were hoping for a St. Patrick's Day baby. Then for a St. Joseph's Day baby. I was having no part of it. Instead, I arrived on the

first day of spring, the youngest of four. Not long after, our family moved from the city to the sleepy village of Orchard Lake, Michigan. My neighborhood was called Harbor Hills, and it is the setting for much of my new memoir, THE LONGEST TRIP HOME.

The church was just three doors down -- no coincidence -- and my earliest memories are steeped in the fragrances of devotion: incense and sacramental wine, beeswax and musty pews. I was an altar server and later the office boy at the church rectory, where I earned a dollar an hour answering phones and doorbells.

Like just about every other dad in the neighborhood, my father worked with cars, as an engineer for General Motors. Mom was a full-time mother and housewife, and proud of it. When not cooking big meals or ironing our blue Catholic-school uniform shirts, she worried about our moral fabric and prayed a priestly vocation would be in the future for at least one of us. (Sorry on all counts, Mom.) She had a sharp sense of humor and a wonderful, effortless gift for storytelling, some of which she concedes wore off on me.

I got into writing by default because I was so bad at everything else. Algebra, geometry, French, chemistry, physics -- they all escaped me. But writing, now there was a subject I could have some fun with. By eighth grade I was penning parodies of the nuns, and in high school, besides writing for the school newspaper, I started an underground tabloid, which earned me a celebrated trip to the principal's office. From there it was on to Central Michigan University, where I earned the princely sum of twenty-five cents per column inch writing for the campus newspaper while slugging away at a double major in journalism and English.

My first full-time writing job came immediately upon graduation in 1979 when I was hired as a police reporter for the small and lackluster *Herald-Palladium* in the Michigan harbor town of St. Joseph. I rode all night with cops, photographed murder victims, picked my way through smoldering house fires and sat over coffee with grieving parents. I also summoned the courage to ask out a willowy and tart-tongued reporter on the staff whose name was Jenny.

In 1985, I won a fellowship into the Kiplinger Mid-Career Program in Public Affairs Reporting at Ohio State University, which would become my ticket out of small-town journalism. After earning my master's degree at OSU, I had the good fortune of landing a second fellowship, this one at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida, where I gained a keen appreciation for an aptly named local rum concoction known as The Hurricane. Faced with the prospect of returning to unemployment and freezing temperatures in Michigan, I took a job at the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale. Jenny quickly followed, landing a position as a feature writer at *The Palm Beach Post*. I bumped my way up from a bureau reporter to metropolitan columnist, a job I found suited me better than I ever imagined any job could. Not long after arriving in steamy South Florida, Jenny and I married, bought a little bungalow together a block off the water, and brought home a wildly neurotic Labrador retriever that we named after a certain famous reggae star. At the time I had no idea our loopy, attention-deficit dog would someday provide me the inspiration to fulfill a lifelong dream of writing a book. Nor that that book, MARLEY & ME, would go on to become an international bestseller with some 5 million copies sold and be made into a motion picture.

But before there was the phenomenon known as Marley, there was a career move, which took me from South Florida to rural eastern Pennsylvania to become editor of Rodale's *Organic Gardening* magazine. What can I say? I had this crazy dream of making my hobby my job and my job my hobby. It didn't take me long to realize how much I missed daily newspapers and, even more, writing in the first person. A little more than three years later, I jumped back into my beloved newspaper vocation, joining the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as the paper's three-times-a-week Pennsylvania columnist, where I happily remained for more than four years.

In February 2007, with MARLEY & ME winding down from 76 weeks on the bestseller list, twenty-three of them at #1, I decided to take a break from daily newspapers to focus full-time on writing my new book, THE LONGEST TRIP HOME. It is a story very close to my heart because it is about a family very close to my heart --- my own. I finished the manuscript in early 2008 just as Fox 2000 Pictures was gearing up to begin filming MARLEY & ME. Jenny and I were fortunate to be able to spend several days on the movie set, both in Miami and Philadelphia, and we were thrilled to watch the sensitive, funny, and thoughtful way in which Owen Wilson and Jennifer Aniston portrayed us. I'm not sure I would have thought to pair them as John and Jenny, but as soon as I saw their on-camera chemistry, I knew that producer Gil Netter and director David Frankel had struck gold.

Frankel, being the nice guy that he is, offered to work us into a scene as extras. I won't say what scene, but I will say that it included, in addition to Wilson and Aniston, one of my all-time favorite actresses, a screen legend whom I had a mad crush on for years. Moviegoers will be relieved to hear that I had no spoken lines and was kept safely in the background where I couldn't muck up anything too badly.

As filming wrapped up, the producers presented me with a most amazing gift: one of the puppies that played Marley in the movie. His name is Woodson and, as I write this, he is lying at my feet along with our other Labrador retriever, Gracie. Both are calm and mellow and get along just fine. We all agree they're no Marley --- not that there's anything wrong with that.

Critical Praise

"Grogan's memoir of his journey for identity is akin to Barack Obama's **Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance**."

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