



One Great Book: Volume 1, Episode 8 *This Must Be the Place* by Maggie O'Farrell

[Show Notes](#)

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume 1, Book 8: *This Must Be the Place*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to One Great Book, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it.

[MUSIC]

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[01:13]

Readers, last week's episode was on *Sleeping Giants* by Sylvain Neuvel, that's in Volume 1, Episode 7 of *One Great Book*. I'm not saying it will be like this forever, but these days, the fiction in my home library is arranged in (loose) alphabetical order, by author last name, which means when I went to grab Neuvel's book off my bookshelves, I couldn't help but notice the title nestled up next to it. It was Maggie O'Farrell's 2016 novel *This Must Be the Place*.

I've been itching to re-read this one, again, ever since a bookish friend recently mentioned that she'd finally read it—at my urging—and loved it. Well, after pulling the O'Farrell off the shelves, I couldn't resist reading it again myself. Regular listeners know that I *am* a re-reader, and I've written about this extensively including in *I'd Rather Be Reading*. I believe that when you return to a book it reveals something new with each reading.

With the addition of my most recent read I've now read it cover to cover *four* times in just eighteen months. Uh, that's a *lot*, verging perhaps on ridiculous, even for me. So what is it about this book that keeps bringing me back? It's wildly ambitious, for one. I'm tempted to call it sprawling for its scope—it *does* span seventy years—but it's too tightly written to truly call it that. It's a kaleidoscope of a novel or perhaps a mosaic constantly shifting its point of view, its timeline, its location around the globe. It's lush, and laden with symbolism, constantly circling the concept of what it means to belong to a place, or a person—and clearly, I think *This Must Be the Place* is one. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

On its surface, this is the portrait of an unlikely but successful marriage between a reclusive French film star and an Irish-American linguistics professor. They meet in an unlikely place:



Daniel is traveling through rural Ireland for family reasons that would be comic if they were not so serious, and Claudette is hiding from the world, as she has been ever since, at the height of her fame, she dropped out of her own life. Daniel is charming, sociable, and a little oblivious, by nature, and it takes him a bit to realize that the oddly familiar woman he's encountered on an Irish back road is the famous film star who faked her own death and disappeared all those years ago.

[03:53]

But it seems they are meant for each other, and they make an unlikely go of it—until something from Daniel's past, something from twenty years prior, something he wouldn't even *know* had happened had he not caught a single specific minute of a radio broadcast while pulling his car out of the driveway, threatens to destroy everything they've so carefully built. To quote the novel: "How miniscule the causes and how devastating their effects." We see that, in this book, over and over.

And we should, because life—I mean real life—is like that, and O'Farrell's story of a fictional marriage repeatedly manages to echo the experience of our actual lives. She does it consistently, convincingly, without verging into heavy-handedness. In fact, one of my favorite things I've written for my blog since I began more than eight years ago was spurred by *This Must Be the Place*. The piece isn't *about* the book—it's about a loss of my own—but O'Farrell's story gave me a way in, a way to talk about it, a way to reflect on and share that experience. Isn't that the power of fiction? But doesn't it take a *powerful* book to do that well?

[MUSIC]

I love the way O'Farrell portrays an intricate web of family relationships, and how she deftly illustrates that when it comes to the people we love, the smallest moments matter. There are forces that pull people together, and forces that pull us apart. What does that mean for us? How will we respond?

So much of this book is about what happens at the hinge moments in life, where we have to decide in an instant which way to go. In O'Farrell's novel, the choice—though it may be



imperceptible at the time—is often between giving grace to someone we love—or *not*. There’s so much to discuss here, about the things that really matter: family and relationships, choices and the actions we do or maybe don’t take, hope and forgiveness, courage to deal with all the crap life throws your way.

[05:59]

At one point in the story, Daniel describes his home, the one he’s made with Claudette, a tumbledown farmhouse in one of the most remote valleys in Ireland. He says, “To get here you really have to want to get here.” While that’s certainly true of Claudette’s Irish refuge, we see another truth in the pages of this book. To get to a place of love, of peace, of contentment, you *really* have to want to get there, because sometimes it will seem as though the whole world is conspiring to keep you from that place.

What I really want to say is, “Read it, I KNOW you’ll love it!” but that’s not really our style around here and besides reading is personal and every reader is different. Instead, I’ll say that this book is an obvious choice for readers who loved Kate Atkinson’s *A God in Ruins* and Wallace Stegner’s *Crossing to Safety*—in fact the endings of the *Crossing to Safety* and *This Must Be the Place* are strikingly similar; it would make such an excellent book club conversation. In short, if you have a place in your heart and on your shelves for inventive, emotionally resonant literary fiction, that sometimes flouts convention but does it with purpose, whose characters you might love not in spite of, but *because* of, their flaws, *This Must Be the Place* may be the next great book you’re looking for.

[MUSIC]

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[08:08]

Readers, that concludes this first volume of One Great Book. Be sure to stay subscribed in your favorite podcast app so you'll know when we have new episodes out. It won't be long.

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Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on today's episode.

Share your thoughts on *This Must Be the Place* with me on Twitter @AnneBogel, that's Anne with an E, B as in books O-G-E-L or on Instagram you can find me there @AnneBogel and @WhatShouldIReadNext.

Readers, that's it for this episode and this volume, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.