



THIN PLACES

A Natural History of
Healing and Home

By Kerri ní
Dochartaigh

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Discussion Questions

1. Early in her memoir, Kerri ní Dochartaigh shares her definition of “aitenna tania”—or “thin places” as “places that make us feel something larger than ourselves, as though we are in a place between worlds, beyond experience.” [23] What thin places does she mention throughout the book, and what memories are tied to them? Can you recall thin places from your past? Do they haunt you or comfort you? Recall the emotions and memories flowing through each place.

2. The Troubles were a period of violence in Northern Ireland from the 1960s to the 1990s rooted in deep conflicts over borders, terrorism, and colonialism. Growing up during the Troubles left ní Dochartaigh scarred and traumatized, yet she still felt called back to her hometown in her early thirties. Reflect on other long periods of tumult in global history and their impacts on culture, migration, and international policy. Have you been impacted by political and cultural tumult?

3. “I have returned to the site of my trauma and I am allowing the land to hold me in its strong, silent hands. I have found the words for butterflies in my native tongue, and I am drawing their lines on my insides.” [50] How does learning Irish help ní Dochartaigh process her traumatic childhood and ease her uncertainty for the future?

4. In chapter three, ní Dochartaigh shares childhood memories of the petrol bombing that forced her family out of their home, followed by her struggles with alcohol in adulthood and the nightmares that lingered into sobriety. Discuss this compounding of trauma.

5. “Grief is a country that has no definite borderlines and that recognises no single trajectory. It is a space that did not exist before your loss, and that will never disappear from your map, no matter how hard you rub at the charcoal lines.” [97] How does ní Dochartaigh use the idea of place and borders to process grief?

6. Discuss the turns toward silence and suffering in chapter six when ní Dochartaigh felt as if she did not have a home.

7. ní Dochartaigh writes about Irish women: “We have been forced into silence, over and over and over again. We have been made to feel unclean, unworthy; we have been made to feel like we are not even really here.” [160-161] Discuss the moments of reclamation and action in *Thin Places* by women.

8. “When we hallow a place, we bless it and make it holy. We sanctify and honour it; we consecrate and hold it as sacred.” [218] Discuss ní Dochartaigh’s approach and use of religious language to speak on place and nature.

9. ní Dochartaigh reflects during the winter solstice: “The dark has been painted – over much time – as being a negative thing, a part of existence to be wary of, a bringer of fear and things best not to be thought of. Yet nature tells us a different story. The earth tells us, over and over, as each year turns the circle of itself around, that it is in the dark where beginnings are found. Life first is dreamed, birthed and shaped in the absence of light.” [249] Have you ever felt inspired or comforted by the natural world in your life, particularly during times of darkness?

10. Readers and reviewers both in the U.K., where *Thin Places* was originally published, and in the U.S. have reflected on ní Dochartaigh’s distinct and singular writing style. What other writers have unique writing styles that have stuck with you over the years?

