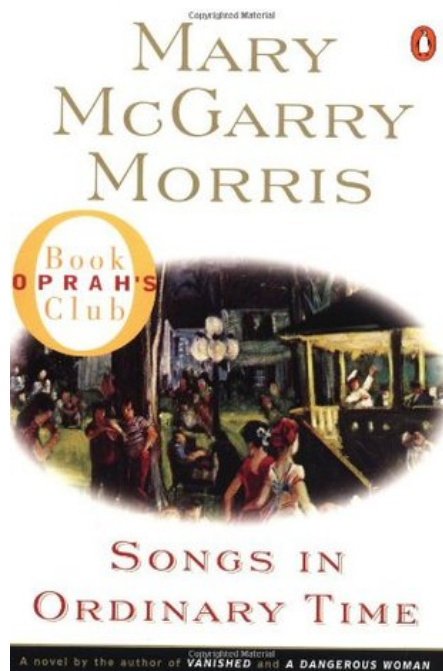




Songs in Ordinary Time

Mary McGarry Morris

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Songs in Ordinary Time is set in the summer of 1960 - the last of quiet times and America's innocence. It centers on Marie Fermoyale, a strong but vulnerable woman whose loneliness and ambition for her children make her easy prey for the dangerous con man Omar Duvall. Marie's children are Alice, seventeen - involved with a troubled young priest; Norm, sixteen - hotheaded and idealistic; and Benjy, twelve - isolated and misunderstood, and so desperate for his mother's happiness that he hides the deadly truth only he knows about Duvall. Among a fascinating cast of characters we meet the children's alcoholic father, Sam Fermoyale, now living with his senile mother and embittered sister; Sam's meek brother-in-law, who makes anonymous "love" calls from the bathroom of his ailing appliance store; and the Klubock family, who - in complete contrast to the Fermoyales - live an orderly life in the perfect house next door.

An Oprah Winfrey Book Club pick.

Songs in Ordinary Time Details

Date : Published August 1st 1996 by Viking (first published August 1995)

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Author : Mary McGarry Morris

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From Reader Review Songs in Ordinary Time for online ebook

Heather Lapinsky says

Not a favorite.

Every single one of these characters continually made the worst possible decisions at every opportunity. It became increasingly absurd that no one seemed to ever learn from their mistakes or to even recognize that their own poor decisions were to blame for their misery.

The con-man was written very well- he came off as sleazy and slimy as he should have been. All of the characters were written really solidly, to be honest. It was just the constant, unfailing, pick-the-worst-choice-possible plot device that drove me nuts.

Stephanie says

The characters in this novel are facing bleak prospects, their plights hard and long... no surprise; it is an Oprah pick after all.

I hesitantly picked it up - 740 pages of bleakness is what I first thought. What can I say, I've read enough of Oprah's picks to know that sometimes the journey she's recommended I embark on will leave me with feelings of hopelessness.

But altogether it was not a bad read... there is a bit of redemption in the end but the author is true enough to the characters to not squeeze an ounce of happiness into that ending.

Despite what sounds like a negative review, I enjoyed the author's narrative style and perceptiveness... and I'll look up her other works.

Benjy, the littlest of the Fermoyles (the principal characters of the book)... is such a beautiful character... wishing so hard for his mom's happiness. The mom's character is heart-breaking... she does have love... it just is trapped inside by the overwhelming pressures of daily routine and the constant threat of poverty.

Susan says

"Songs in Ordinary Time" was an Oprah Book Club pick in June 1997. Some might call it a 740-page tome. I loved every word.

In hundreds of mini-chapters, Morris takes readers to the summer of 1960 in small-town Atkinson, Vermont, where readers meet Marie Fermoye, a divorced mother of three, along with her neighbors, her ex-in-laws, her boss, a variety of other townpeople – and, most significantly, Omar Duvall, a man without a shred of honesty.

Marie's oldest child, daughter Alice, graduates from high school and Marie is determined she will enter the University of Vermont in the fall. But this is a family unsure where the next dime is coming from...much less college tuition. Sam Fermoye, Marie's alcoholic ex-husband and father of her children, is often a sympathetic character, despite his shortcomings.

Oprah.com says, "Songs in Ordinary Time is a masterful epic of the everyday, illuminating the kaleidoscope of lives that tell the compelling story of this unforgettable family."

I absolutely agree and found myself musing that, except for an accident of birth, any of us might find ourselves victims of alcoholic, vulnerable, struggling parents who never seem to catch a break. So much of who we turn out to be in life depends on our families, our friends, our towns, how we grew up. I found myself hoping against hope that this family and these children would turn out okay in the end even though they seem doomed from the beginning.

Enter Dr. Phil...perhaps in 2011...

Oprah.com still has lots of resources for the original Oprah Book Club books, including book club discussion questions for "Songs..." along with other info.

I highly recommend "Songs..." for anyone with the time to devote to this compelling family story. It's important to realize the short chapters facilitate reading in brief chunks and it's an especially great read for anyone who can identify with being a teen in the 1960s.

Lori says

Songs is well written.

The characters are interesting.

The plot is believable.

The town is realistic.

And all of it is incredibly, incredibly depressing.

Not *one* single person in the entire book has a good life. Or even a reasonably happy one -- or a shot at happiness, at that. And the fact that it's well written does nothing to help the fact that it's painful to read about these pitiful little lives in this pitiful little town.

Even though it's set a decade and a half before my birth, maybe it just all rings too familiar. But I literally had to force myself to finish it.

The only good thing? I'm now done.

Susan Katz says

I don't usually give bad reviews; I just skip those books. And the fault here may lie in the reader, not in the book. But I found this novel simply unreadable. I only managed to get through 50 pages, but there was not one hint in those pages that the book had any message other than the world is an ugly place and people can be badly damaged. I don't need a book to tell me that. Perhaps I should have been interested in knowing what happened when the murderous con man moved in on the dysfunctional family. But there wasn't a character sympathetic enough so that I cared what happened to him or her. Every character was selfish, deceptive, and manipulative at best, if not cruel and violent. Or else they were disturbed to a degree that would require psychiatric diagnosis. Even the dog was unpleasant. I don't require a Pollyanna view of the world, but if its darkness is going to be portrayed in a book, then I want that portrayal to have some meaning. I'm not interested in merely being a voyeur of madness, addiction, and dysfunction. I wouldn't read Dickens either if every character was Fagin or Uriah Heep.

Nomanisan says

Oh, my. I absolutely detested this book; I finished merely because I HAD to get finished with it so that I could put it away. Morris has created a world in which no one is free of some warping or embittering experience except the family next door to the protagonists, and they are presented in such cliched, matchstick form as to be beyond credibility--they exist merely as a balance to the pitiful main family and the characters who attach to them in an ever-widening series of cracks in the society of the small town in which they live. If her point is that we all have weaknesses, in the vein of "there but for the grace of God...", I get it--but I entirely reject the apparent observation that everyone (with the exception of the unrealistically portrayed next-door neighbor) is twisted--not just flawed, but twisted. I do get the idea that Morris apparently thinks she is making, that Marie Fermoye (the central character) is actually strong, pulling something from nothing, from the disaster that her life has been--but the novel is distasteful to me almost from the start. There were times while I was reading it that I wanted to get up and wash my hands. So--Oprah recommendation or no, I thoroughly dislike this book and recommend it to NO ONE--unless you just want to see for yourself, and that's exactly what I would do after I read such a repudiation.

Laurel Wicke says

This is about the time I quit reading Oprah's bookclub books. I want to slash my own wrists after reading most of them. I mean a steady diet of tragedy is just too much.

Blessedutopia says

I'm cheating by putting this in my read shelf. I read...half of it...which was brutal. I've never been so bored and unmotivated to read anything for "pleasure" in my life. I'd prefer a root canal...at least at the end of the torture there's a constructive ending.

Blair says

I started a book club once and this was the book that we started with. It was awful. We all struggled through it and I think only three of us finished it. There were threats not to come back and I was banned from picking

any further reading material for the group. Nothing happy, nothing good, just a pathetic mess of characters making poor choices. I'm all about poor choices - I make my fair share of them. But I try to learn from them and move forward. No forward movement in this book. Everyone was stuck, even the peripheral characters. It made me want to either drink or off myself. Maybe both, as one may lead to the next.

Jennifer Millspaugh Gray says

This book was the most depressing, disheartening book I have ever read. For over 800 pages you keep thinking "Things can't get worse, they've got to start getting better." Oh yes they can and oh no they don't. Unless your life is really crappy right now and you want to read the only book where people have it worse than you, don't waste your time.

Carrie Kellenberger says

What a fantastic story! I am so surprised to read all of the negative reviews here. I thought the novel was beautifully written, and I enjoyed every last word of it. It took some time to get through, but Morris held my attention for two weeks with her wonderful, in depth characters and story telling. All of the characters are tragically despondent and intricately entwined with each another, all of them constantly moving away from one another only to come to a full circle in the end.

The story focuses on a single mother and her drunk ex-husband, the con man she brings into her home, her three children and their friends and classmates; Joey Selden the popcorn man, Sonny, Blue Mooney, Renie and Helen. These characters were just some of the stories that swirled through the narrative.

All in all, *Songs in Ordinary Time* was a brilliant read, and it joins a short list of books that I reread on a regular basis.

Hope R says

At first glance this appears to be a look at small town America, but it's better than that. "Songs in Ordinary Time" is more of a close study on how people justify their actions.

How does a swindler view taking other people's money as acceptable? How does a husband explain to himself why he hit his wife in a drunken argument? How does a businessman justify becoming a burglar? How does an alcoholic rationalize that "things will be different this time"?

Morris gives a perceptive look into the human psyche with this book.

R.W. Patterson says

This is another of my all-time favorite books. I've recommended this one to friends over the years--so heartbreakingly beautiful and well written. Leaves a memory on the heart that isn't easily forgotten.

Debbie says

This book was a bit difficult to get into at first, but the author has such a way with words that I found myself reading some of her lines over and over again just to savor the artistry. I read this book about a year ago, and I still think about it regularly. The characters were so well crafted that I feel like I know them and wish I could read more about them. They were not all likeable, but they were so real. I wish I could write like this! If you prefer character driven novels over plot driven, this is the book for you. I thought it was great, but didn't realize how great until long after I read it, if that makes sense.

Stephanie says

I learned nothing, and I have no idea what Oprah was thinking. For 740 pages I stuck with this book, thinking it has to get better, there has to be something more. There isn't. Everyone ends up in the same place they started.

Hillery says

First and foremost, this book was WAY too long. I am not against a long book, but 740 pages of the summer of 1960 in a small VT town where the action is either lacking, or repetitive, is excessive. What was the point? Morris could have left 200+ pages out of this book and no one would have known. The editor clearly did not do his/her job. Interesting, though universally depressing, characters, but again, why so many? It was not possible to keep up with them all, or care about them all. And a fatal error for me....an easily checked anachronism that showed the lack of effort on the editor's part--a Mustang pulls into a gas station in the summer of 1960. One problem--Mustangs weren't introduced until 1964. Only stubbornness made me finish this book.

Sarah says

It's an Oprah book club book, so of course it's long, with a detailed plot, but also wonderfully written. Taken individually, our lives may seem routine and "ordinary". Connected with those around us, however, life is anything but ordinary. This book highlights a period of time in one family's life, and the community around them. Just as in real life, what the family views as "ordinary" is actually a story filled with emotion and unexpected surprises. The author does an excellent job creating well rounded characters, ones that are both loveable and unlikable, making them easily relatable to some friend or acquaintance in the reader's life. The book doesn't make any attempts to sugar coat the aspects of daily life, and yet manages to reflect how extraordinary each individuals story can be.

Sharon says

This books reminds me of why I stopped reading Oprah's book club selections. Thank goodness I don't live in Arlington, VT, where this book is set (nominally, via references to ski boots and neighboring NY and Quebec). The town is composed of the entire class list from "ACME book of Dopes and Losers." They are all here: the Con Man, the Drunk, the Bitter Divorcee, the Pervert, the Conflicted Priest, the Seemingly Normal Person with Hidden Secrets..not a likable character in the bunch. If I weren't in desperate need of something to kill the time during midnight feedings, I'd really resent the time I spent plowing through these 800 pages. Even worse - I think I may have read it before (or is it just that it's full of cliches? I'll never know).

Dionne Nelson says

Oh, Oprah! Whatever did you see in this book? Only because of my hard-and-fast rule that I must finish reading every book I start, did I complete "Songs in Ordinary Time". Had the book been capped at, say, 300 pages it might have been, at least, moderately tolerable. At page 600, I was ready to physically hurt people . . . and there were still 152 pages to go! I'm truly at a loss for even one kind word to say about this book. The whole thing was fraught with far too many characters, many with woefully incomplete story lines, and every one of them needed to be medicated and could benefit from more than a few hours on a therapist's couch. I think I registered only two emotions reading this book - neither good. It was dark, depressing, and oftentimes confusing as hell. The writing was awkwardly bad. And what was up with the creepy old sister living with the dead judge for weeks in his room in the sisters' boarding house? Nobody smelled anything? And nobody clears out a JUDGE's room of personal and professional papers when he dies? Give me a break. Implausible and totally unbelievable. Oy Vey! I dunno, maybe it's a Vermont thing? Hey, it's the holidays . . . if you've got people you hate on your gift list this year, give them this book. Otherwise, avoid at all costs.

Debbie McAfee says

I actually ended up liking this book --- although it ended abruptly. It reminded me a lot of Carson McCullers or even a little Flannery O'Connor or Faulkner-like -- because it's a collection of these misfits --- the focus is on a family, but we also get glimpses of all the characters in this town. They're all so pitiful, lost, eccentric, etc. It took me a long time to read the book, however. I could only read about 25 pages a day, but I kept reading because I couldn't figure out how it would all end. I knew that there was no escape for these people and that their mundane lives would just continue on --- so I was intrigued how the author would wrap it up. The book's a little depressing. I would recommend it as a good read -- It was an Oprah book several years ago and I had bought it and stuck it on my shelf. Would love to chat with someone about it.
