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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **Himself** by Jess Kidd

#### Summary

A charming ne'er-do-well returns to his haunted Irish hometown to uncover the truth about his mother in this “exceptional debut novel” (Publishers Weekly) and turns the town—and his life—upside down.

Having been abandoned at an orphanage as a baby, Mahony assumed all his life that his mother wanted nothing to do with him. That is, until one night in a Dublin pub he receives an anonymous note implying that she may have been forced to give him up. Determined to find out what really happened, Mahony embarks on a pilgrimage back to his hometown, the rural village of Mulderrig. Neither he nor Mulderrig can possibly prepare for what’s in store . . .

#### Discussion Questions

1. The town of Mulderrig is haunted by ghosts that the protagonist, Mahony, can see. From both a practical and thematic standpoint, what role do you think the ghosts play in this story, and why is it significant that only Mahony can see them?
2. How did the violence in the prologue affect your reading of the rest of the book? Is there a shift in tone between the prologue and the following chapters, and, if so, what might the purpose be?
3. Why do you think the author chose to put a famous play at the center of the story? How does it benefit the plot, and do you see any similarities between Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Himself*?
4. How would you characterize the tone of the story? How does the language contribute to the tone? What else contributes to it?
5. Aside from ghosts, consider the other supernatural elements that the author introduces into the universe of her novel. What is the role of the forest, for example? Why does nature “misbehave”?
6. Is Mahony’s outsider identity important to the novel? How does his otherness mirror Orla’s experience?

7. The relationship between Mahony and Mrs. Cauley is central to the book. Why do you think this is? What bonds them so closely?
8. What do you think we should take away from Orla's story? Had Orla been a man (i.e., Mahony's father), how might the story have played out differently?
9. How does the culture of Mulderrig compare to the place where you grew up?
10. Are all small towns unhappy in their own ways (to paraphrase Tolstoy), or do there tend to be significant overlaps in the challenges that small towns face? How does, say, a small town in your home state compare to a rural village in County Mayo, Ireland?
11. Did you come away from the novel feeling positive, negative, or neutral about religion? Why? Do certain aspects strike you as hypocritical? If so, which aspects?
12. To what extent is Himself a love story? Were you at all surprised by the ending?
13. From what you know of the rich tradition of Irish storytelling, does Himself fit the mold(s), or buck convention? Is Mahony a typical hero? Why or why not?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher