

Reading Group Guide for *The Thing About December* by Donal Ryan

1. Do you support Johnsey's decision to keep the farm throughout the book? If not, why might Johnsey have acted as he did, and how might you have expected him to act differently?
2. When Johnsey's mother dies, Father Cotter tells Johnsey that "he had been very calm throughout his ordeal" and notes that she had been dead for at least five hours by the time the ambulance arrived. How might this encapsulate, or reflect, Johnsey's character?
3. When Johnsey's bandages come off, he realizes that his assumptions about Dave's appearance were inaccurate. What might have caused him to form such assumptions, and how might his discovery on the contrary have changed his opinion of Dave?
4. Do Mumbly Dave and Siobhán actually love Johnsey from the start, or do they merely tolerate his presence? Similarly, how does he feel about them, and how does this construct the relationships between the three characters?
5. Why do you think Siobhán did what she did in the hospital? Was she right to do this, legal implications aside?
6. The Unthanks try repeatedly to offer Johnsey advice, but he does not take it. Are they acting in self-interest in doing so, or do they really have Johnsey's best interests at heart?
7. Were you surprised by the way the novel ended? Was this inevitable, or do you think it could have ended differently?
8. Johnsey's account of his struggles to keep the land clearly differs from those of the paper and the townspeople. Is either one truly reliable, or might there be another truth? What might that truth be?
9. In what ways does Johnsey's tragic fate result from his own intellectual limitations, and in what ways does it result from the effects that greed has on the behaviour of his neighbors?
10. Because Johnsey narrates his own story, the reader realizes that his interior life is more complex and insightful than other characters in the book assume it to be, and yet he nonetheless comes across as someone who is clearly mentally disadvantaged. What do you think of the balance Donal Ryan strikes in this regard, and how do you think it compares to "real life"?