



## READING GROUP GUIDE

### A Sheepdog Named Oscar: Love and Companionship in Rural Ireland

**A moving memoir of grief, healing, and the unbreakable bond between man and dog, set against the lush backdrop of rural Ireland.**

"A beautiful, vulnerable, polymathic book that traverses art and animal; the rescue and recovery of Oscar and author; and the belonging of each to the other in their own particular way."

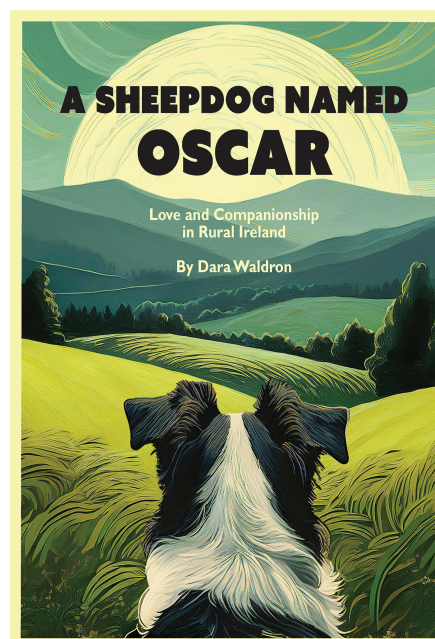
—*Irish Examiner*

"Set against the landscapes of west Limerick and east Clare, through local walking trails and moments of quiet reflection, Waldron shares a moving account of loss and recovery that resonates with emotional honesty."

—*Limerick Leader*

"What wins one's heart is not just the almost indecently elegant writing, writing that really does justify the descriptor "Proustian," but Dara Waldron is right on time with this deeply personal memoir that explores extra-human sentience as part of a relationship cemented through grief, growth, and regeneration."

—Aryan Kaganof



**New York Times  
Bestseller**

Barnes & Noble  
Nonfiction Pick  
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available**



## READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. One of the central themes of *A Sheepdog Named Oscar* is how the beautiful landscape of rural Ireland reflects the emotional terrain that the author navigates in the years following the shocking sudden death of his father. Did any particular episode related to landscape stay with you or move you the most? Where do you turn for solace within the natural environment?
2. Oscar's first appearance in the book is him peeking out of a run-down shed on the derelict farm that he had made his home. How does Oscar's trust evolve as he understands he has found a new home where he is safe, loved, and cared for? Have you had a relationship with an animal that evolved and grew over time, or do you know of another example?
3. What role does the author's family play in the story of finding Oscar? Living with and learning from Oscar? How about the larger community of friends and neighbors?
4. *A Sheepdog Named Oscar* opens with a story about a children's film (*Finding Nemo*) on page one. Throughout the book, the author's writing slips between his experiences with Oscar and vivid daydreams, which are similar to short film scenes. In what instances does he do this, and why? What depth or extra information does this add to the otherwise nonfiction storytelling?
5. Waldron's book has many stories about rural life and the connection between people in Ireland and animals. Are there some examples of village and farming life that surprised you or made you think about your own experiences with animals? Have any special animals showed you a window onto the past?
6. How does the author bring the idea of animal rights into the story of Oscar? How do we as humans understand animal consciousness? What is your own experience with the intelligence of other creatures? Were there any books discussed that made you want to learn more?
7. In many ways, Oscar triggers the author's difficult emotions as much as he helps to heal him. How does re-living the loss become relieving the loss and hurt? Were there any scenes that made you feel a loss of your own, and if so, was there any healing that happened for you in reading the book?



8. Just as much as it is about grief, *A Sheepdog Named Oscar* is about the simple pleasure of companionship, finding love in your life, and the joy of living again after time passes following a major loss. How does the author come upon these moments of realization? With whom? And what are some of the environmental cues that the author uses to signal the world is new again for him as he and Oscar start to heal each other?

9. How do the music and poetry references in the book create a sense of continuity or background "soundtrack" to the visual, cinematic parts of the book? Have you explored the author's playlist on Spotify? Did it surprise you or lend other depth to the story of Oscar?

10. From your own experience of spiritual traditions, did you gain any insights about how Ireland's particular traditions, from the ancient to the modern, are reflected in the landscape?

11. Is it possible to have an end to a book like this? How does the book come to rest, and where does the story point to next? Reflect upon the healing journey of our lives — the cycles, the moments of losing oneself, of returning to oneself, of finding protection, inner peace, or grace.

### **What have you learned about collies, Dara?**

"In the process of writing the book, a fascination grew with a 'collie' breed with such deep roots in Irish and British culture; some believe the word 'collie' derives from the Irish Gaelic 'coiléan' used by Irish monks who had moved to Scotland. The word literally means 'helper.' Collies are dogs that help in some way. Over the four years that form the basis of *A Sheepdog Named Oscar*, 'help' began to manifest as care. And so, I set out to explore the heritage and culture of sheepdogs and collies as helpers who care, who have long since entered the most fascinating forms of symbioses with humans. I scurried down multiple rabbit holes, all the time looking to account for love I had for Oscar and love I believed, in the deepest recesses of my being, he had for me. I hoped that readers would come to feel in their bones that 'help' and 'care' form part of the core of life and working dogs don't just herd animals in a field. They are part of us."



**Dara Waldron** (b. 1973) is a film scholar and author of two monographs and multiple articles in international film journals and magazines: *Millennium Film Journal*, *Alphaville*, and *MIRAJ* among others. His 2018 book *New Nonfiction Film: Art, Poetics and Documentary Theory* is a standard reference for documentary filmmaking courses across the globe. He teaches Critical and Contextual studies at Limerick School of Art and Design and has been a visiting Professor at Aalto University in Helsinki, LUCA School of Arts in Brussels, and the Ethnography Lab at University of Colorado, Boulder. In 2023 he published a study of sheepherding traditions documented in the 2009 film *Sweetgrass* (dir. Barbash, Castaing-Taylor) that included auto-ethnographic reflection on herding practices and farming in Ireland. *A Sheepdog Named Oscar*, an extension of this study, is his first memoir. Born in Manchester and raised in Ireland, he currently lives on the border between County Limerick and Tipperary in Ireland's Midwest, in the shadow of the Silvermines Mountains and close to the gates of well-known Glenstal Abbey and its school, which feature prominently in his memoir.







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