

# **ALL SOULS**

## **A Family Story from Southie**

Michael Patrick MacDonald  
A Community Discussion Guide

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## **An Introduction to *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie***

Through impassioned, brilliant personal storytelling, Michael Patrick MacDonald brings us to Southie's lower end, a poor but intensely insular neighborhood its residents agree is the "best place in the world." Through the eyes of the troubled yet keenly gifted observer he was even as a child, we meet Michael's mini-skirted, accordion-playing, usually single mother who cares for her ten children through a combination of high spirits and inspired "getting over."

But too soon Southie becomes a place controlled by resident gangster Whitey Bulger, later revealed to be an FBI informant even as he runs the raging drug culture Southie supposedly never had. It is a world primed for the escalation of class violence, and then, with sickening inevitability, of the racial violence that swirls around Boston's forced busing in the 1970s. The violence spills into the MacDonald family so that within a few years—a sequence laid out in *All Souls* with mesmerizing urgency—four of Michael's siblings lose their lives to poverty and drugs and organized crime. All but destroyed by his grief and the Southie code of silence that doesn't allow him to feel it, MacDonald gets out. His work as an anti-violence activist, first in the all-black neighborhoods of nearby Roxbury then back in the Southie he can't help but love, is the healing close to a story that will leave readers shaken and changed.

## **Comments from Authors and Critics**

“An incendiary, moving book that startles on nearly every page. . . . MacDonald’s nimble prose and detailed recall of grim times long past make for luminous reading; his hard won conception of how ghettoized poverty spawns localized violence, and the dignity he brings to lives snuffed out in chaos, gives *All Souls* a moral urgency usually lacking in current memoir or crime prose. A remarkable work.”

—**Kirkus Reviews** \*

“*All Souls* is a rowdy, sometimes raucous venture into the MacDonald Family’s inner vault. It will leave you weeping and laughing uproariously. A must-read for the uplift of spirit, and for the courage shared by this grand writer.”

—**Malachy McCourt**, author of *A Monk Swimming*

“After reading this harrowing memoir of a Catholic boyhood in a South Boston housing project, ‘poverty’ will never be a mere category to you again. It will wear the face of a family that loses children to drugs and crime, and that face will be white. Michael Patrick MacDonald has a gift for narrative, an eye for social detail, and a voice of earned authenticity.”

—**Jack Beatty**, senior editor, *The Atlantic Monthly* and author of *The Rascal King*

“This is an extraordinary family story about an extraordinary place called Southie. It is a story of a young man climbing a mountain of violence, to emerge with love and hope. *All Souls* grasps your emotions from the first pages and won’t let go.”

—**Howard Zinn**, author of *A People’s History of the United States*

## **About the Author**

Michael Patrick MacDonald was born in Boston in 1966 and grew up in South Boston's Old Colony housing project. He helped launch Boston's successful gun-buyback program and is founder of the South Boston Vigil Group and works with survivor families and young people in Boston's anti-violence movement. He is recipient of the 1999 Daily Points of Light Award, among many others. *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* is his first book.

## **All Souls Discussion Topics for Community Reading Groups**

What preconceptions about Southie did you bring to your reading of *All Souls*? How did the book add to or change what you knew?

Michael Patrick MacDonald writes in chapter 2, “My oldest memories are of my mother crying.” What was the author’s early relationship to his mother like?

How do you feel about Ma’s relationships to the men in her life? To the social workers who visited the MacDonald family early on in Jamaica Plain?

Michael Patrick MacDonald comes to hate Mass Mental during the time Davey is a patient there. He says, “I knew Davey had been through bad things, growing up with a father like Mac and finding his baby brother dead. And to me, it seemed he was being punished for having gone through bad things.” How do you feel about Davey’s life?

Early in the MacDonald family’s life in Old Colony housing project, Michael Patrick MacDonald learned lessons about Southie boundaries—racial, class, and geographic—and codes of behavior. Do you remember what they were? How do these boundaries and codes compare to those of your growing up?

What are the parents’ attitudes toward the behavior of the kids in Old Colony? Are Ma’s attitudes toward her children similar to other Southie parents’?

Michael Patrick MacDonald writes, “Along with the craziness and the cockroaches, the summer of 1974 brought with it great anticipation for the fight of our lives.” How did the realization that the buses were coming influence the behavior of the people in South Boston?

Who were the people and organizations that South Boston residents began to see as the enemy in the busing crisis? And whom did they see as allies? Why?

How did the author feel about the beatings of the Haitian man he witnessed? How did he feel about the violence directed toward Southie kids?

What impact did busing have on Michael and on his brothers and sisters?

How did Southie’s code of loyalty play out among Michael and his siblings? Do you think it was a positive or a negative force?

What role do the police play in the neighborhood throughout *All Souls*? Was any of this familiar to you?

What are the things about Michael Patrick MacDonald's portrait of Frankie's life toward the end, and his death, that stick with you the most?

How does the narrative voice of *All Souls* change as the MacDonald family tragedies mount up?

What do you feel is the turning point or points for Michael Patrick MacDonald during Stevie's trial?

## **A Conversation with Michael Patrick MacDonald**

**Q:** No reader of *All Souls* could forget Ma. Where is Ma now, and what is her life like?

**A:** My mother lives in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. She lives in a place without much social life. A place where people don't really talk to each other on the street, so she misses that about a village like South Boston. But she has a much quieter life. She is raising my niece, Maria, Kathy's daughter. I don't think she misses the traumas, the constant onslaught, but she does miss the social life and being able to talk to strangers walking down the street without them thinking she's strange.

**Q:** Has Southie changed in the 1990s, since you grew up there?

**A:** It's changed a lot. It's changing now, gentrifying really quickly. Some people say the changes are all good because Southie will be more socioeconomically mixed, but this isn't the direction it is going. The neighborhood will definitely become more upper-middle class. Neighborhoods have a transition where they seem mixed for a while, but that doesn't last. I've never seen it last. So South Boston probably could have been the first functionally diverse neighborhood in Boston, but because of the policy of forced integration combined with the gentrification of the neighborhood outside of the housing developments it's going to become a place that looks like apartheid on the surface—one where everybody in the projects is of color and everybody out of the projects is white, middle class, single, and has no kids.

**Q:** What are the things about Southie that will never leave you?

**A:** My mother says that she will never get Southie out of her system. She says she's in a place where she doesn't feel dead, but she doesn't feel alive. That's scary. In South Boston there is a sense of security and a feeling that you don't get in too many communities these days. The old neighborhood is dead in America. South Boston is one of the places that still has that feeling, but it's fast disappearing. For good or bad we always had that sense of neighborhood, the shared struggle, the shared identity. That's something I will always miss, but it's something that most people don't have or appreciate, so I'll just be getting up to date with the rest of the world.

**Q:** You write about Southie's strong code of silence. Was it difficult or frightening to break this code of silence in writing *All Souls*?

**A:** There were frightening times both in my work as an activist and during the writing of the book. It feels like you have no choice, though, and the good outweighs the fear. It's still scary to do things to break the code because it's in your blood to keep silent. But in reality the gangster world falling apart.

**Q:** The scene in your book when you try for the first time to reach your father by telephone is one of the book's most heartbreaking. Did you ever meet him?

**A:** The only time I actually ended up seeing my father was in his casket. His sister called me to invite me to the wake and the funeral. I went to find out whatever I could from his corpse. There wasn't much to learn. The irony is, he's buried a couple of rows down from my brothers' graves. The first time I noticed it I didn't stop—there was no connection. It says a lot about who you really are connected to in the world and how little that has to do with blood. It says a lot about what a father is and isn't.

**Q:** You write about the numbness you felt after the repeated tragedies in your family. Do you still suffer from this, and what has helped you to heal?

**A:** Your body automatically kicks in numbness around trauma, but after a while even that stops working. But I've learned instead of looking for other ways to numb out to immerse myself in the pain and to deal with it. Face it, face the worst aspects of it. It doesn't go away, but you learn to live with it. You might as well make the best use of it. Through activism, writing—there I'm redeeming my life, making it have some value for other people and the bigger picture.

**Q:** What do you wish most for Southie?

**A:** I wish that the opportunities that are there could be seized before it turns into another yuppie neighborhood. The racial mix is reflective of the diversity in the city of Boston, and that can be used to create a strong, functional, working-class community. Southie could become Boston's first functioning diverse and working-class community. I think Boston has missed out on so many opportunities.

## **Suggestions for Community Reading Group Leaders**

1. Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered Yes or No tend to cut off discussions.
2. Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You'll often find that the questions you've prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.
3. Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.
4. Don't be afraid to criticize something about the book, but try to go beyond the "It just didn't appeal to me" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/disliked?
5. Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing, and world view. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the events in the book, or the author's attitude toward events. It's often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences; if that's what the whole group wants to do, that's fine, but keep in mind that that is not a book discussion!

## **Suggestions for Reading Group Participants**

A good discussion depends partly on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions (based on the New York Public Library's book discussion program):

**1. Speak up!** Group discussion is like a conversation; everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.

**2. Listen thoughtfully to others!** Try to understand the other person's point of view; see what experience and thinking it developed from. Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember: There are several points of view possible on every question.

**3. Be brief!** Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as few words as possible; it's more effective in a group discussion. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion keeps everyone in the conversation.

**4. Share your viewpoint and experience!** Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comment of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.

**5. Come with your own questions in mind!** As you read the book, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.

## **A Short History of Forced Busing in Boston**

In June 1974—just as the 1973-74 school year ended—U.S. District Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. issued the [school] desegregation order that would soon tear the city apart.

The ensuing conflict, with its widely publicized images of interracial violence, made a lasting imprint not only on this city but on the whole country as well. Rooftop snipers and platoons of police cars, stabbings in schools, and brutal beatings on the streets—those scenes made it resoundingly clear that school desegregation was not a problem confined to the South. It was a dilemma for the nation.

Yet as profound an impression Boston's busing war made elsewhere, its impact was far deeper at home. For a city that has long cherished its image as a cradle of democratic ideals, the trauma has proven difficult to shake.

Many people see its legacy in the public's lack of confidence in the city schools, and in the stark demographic changes the district has undergone in the past generation. Echoes of the busing battles are also easily heard in the city's ongoing debate over how to improve educational quality, especially when the topic turns to the racially charged issue of neighborhood schools.

For these reasons and more, many people believe that neither the city nor its schools have fully recovered from the crisis and its aftermath. When the case known as *Morgan v. Hennigan* landed on Judge Garrity's desk, there were no laws authorizing separate schools for blacks and whites in Boston.

On the contrary, a 1965 law aimed at eliminating schools that enrolled a majority of non-white students had made Massachusetts the first state to impose sanctions on districts with racially imbalanced schools. The city school committee had been resisting the state's efforts to enforce that law for years when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People agreed to finance a federal lawsuit by a group of Boston blacks in the spring of 1972.

The suit pitted activists such as Ruth Batson, a leader of the NAACP's struggle with the school committee in the 1960s and '70s, against school segregationists, often led by former U.S. Rep. Louise Day Hicks, who opposed busing and sought to repeal Massachusetts' racial-balance law.

In weighing arguments in the case, Garrity focused on whether school officials had engaged in a pattern of actions and inaction that amounted to deliberate separation of the races. On June 21, 1974, he concluded that they did.

"There was a very deliberate discriminatory operation in place," says Garrity, who still hears cases at age 78.

By the time of his decision, a legal battle between the district and state had already yielded a directive requiring the city to implement a far-reaching desegregation plan by September 1974. As a remedy to the violations he had found,

Garrity turned to that plan—which critics had reviled, saying it would tear the city apart. The buses would roll, he decreed, in 2-1/2 months.

The ruling came as a shock.

“I’ll never forget that day,” recalls John M. Halloran, a longtime Boston school administrator who now oversees the district’s desegregation efforts. “My reaction was, ‘My God, we can never get this in place by September. Chaos will ensue.’”

As it turned out, the hasty reassignment of thousands of students proceeded calmly in most schools. But it was the exceptions that the world noticed then, and that the city remembers today.

That autumn, it was South Boston—then a largely working-class section of the city long dominated by Irish-Americans—that emerged as the chief battleground.

Just how much the city and its schools have suffered—or benefited—from court-imposed desegregation remains a matter of lively debate.

Many have concluded that busing accelerated the flight from the public schools by whites and the middle class that was already underway. Others contend that busing’s contribution to that process was only marginal. In the fall of 1972, whites made up some 60 percent of the district’s 90,000 students. Four years later, enrollment had fallen to 71,000, and whites made up less than 45 percent.

Today, 63,000 students attend the city’s schools. Only 15 percent of them are white, 49 percent are black, 26 percent are Hispanic, and the rest are mostly Asian-American, with a tiny percentage of American Indians. At least 71 percent of students come from families poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a figure that school officials say underestimates the level of poverty.

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