

EMILY HOURICAN

"Evoking the decadence of *The Great Gatsby*
and the elegance of *Downton Abbey* . . .
an enthralling tale, a fascinating drama."

— *New York Times* bestselling author
KIRSTEN ALEXANDER

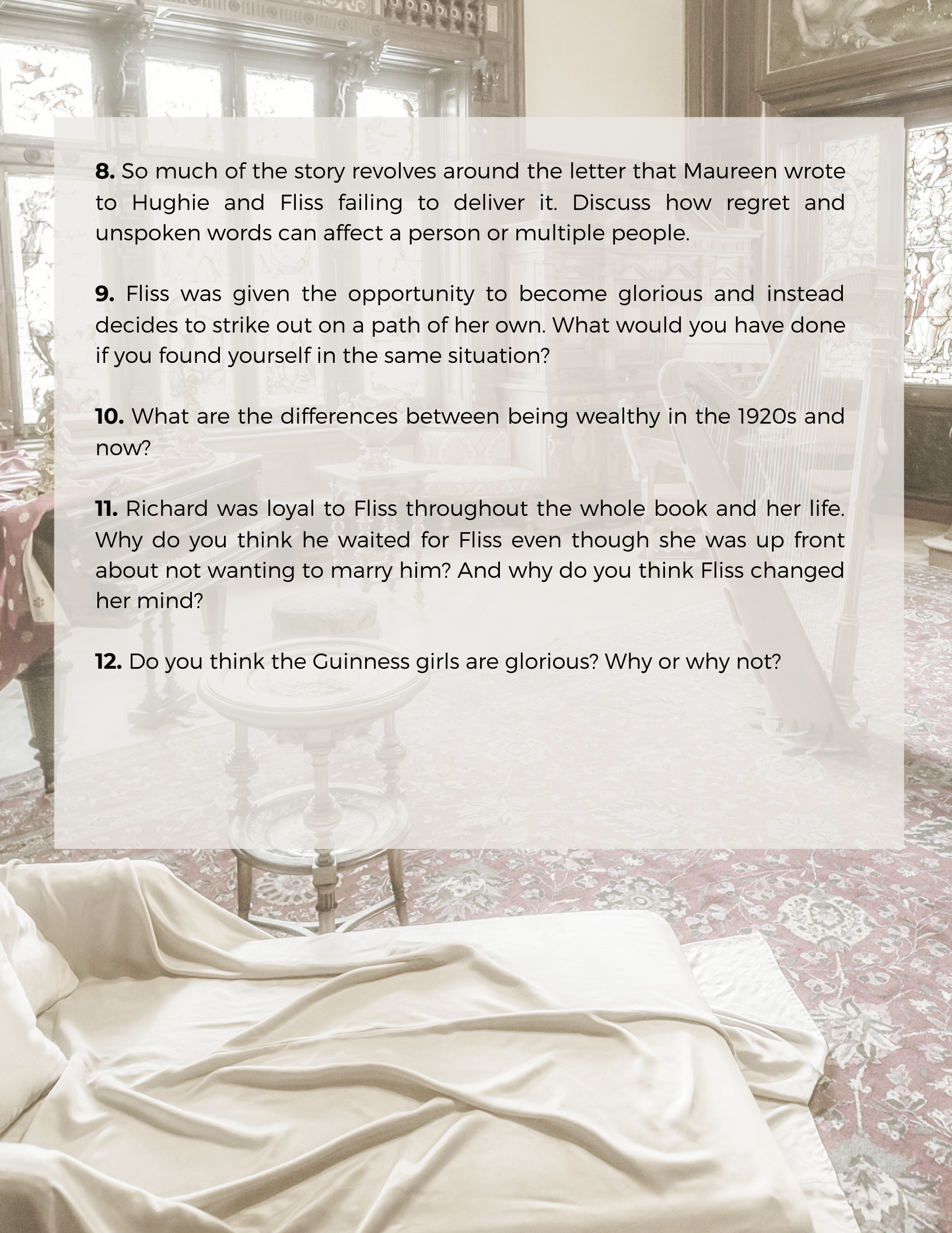
Three sisters.
One shared destiny.

THE
GLORIOUS
GUINNESS
GIRLS

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Aileen, Maureen and Oonagh have very distinct personalities. Who do you identify with the most and why?
- 2.** Fliss was plucked from her home to be a companion for Aileen, Maureen and Oonagh. How would her life have been different if this didn't happen?
- 3.** Gunnie lived to take care of the Guinness women and make their lives run smoothly. Do you think this is a role she enjoyed and wanted for herself?
- 4.** Hughie was on the anti-treaty side in the Irish Civil War and lost his life for his beliefs. Do you have a belief that you would stand up for, no matter the cost?
- 5.** Fliss was included in almost all activities that the Guinness family participated in. But an example of one she couldn't join in on was when they went on an extended holiday. Why do you think she was excluded from certain events but not others?
- 6.** The creation of Guinness beer gave the family the money to live a life of luxury. Is there a dark side to having so much wealth?
- 7.** Jen was fascinated with the rich families in London as an outsider. Why do people follow the lives of the rich and famous with such avidness?



8. So much of the story revolves around the letter that Maureen wrote to Hughie and Fliss failing to deliver it. Discuss how regret and unspoken words can affect a person or multiple people.

9. Fliss was given the opportunity to become glorious and instead decides to strike out on a path of her own. What would you have done if you found yourself in the same situation?

10. What are the differences between being wealthy in the 1920s and now?

11. Richard was loyal to Fliss throughout the whole book and her life. Why do you think he waited for Fliss even though she was up front about not wanting to marry him? And why do you think Fliss changed her mind?

12. Do you think the Guinness girls are glorious? Why or why not?

A CONVERSATION WITH EMILY HOURICAN

What drew you to the story of Aileen, Maureen, and Oonagh?

I had read about the girls—mostly in their later lives when they were married and living in their own very grand houses. The three of them crop up in so many different parts of Irish life—politics, business, literature, art, architecture...Everything I knew about their lives was fascinating. So many husbands, children, tragedies, parties...Finally, I realized they were the perfect characters for a novel, and I couldn't believe no one had ever written one!

How much time did you spend researching before you started writing? How much of the novel is true to real events and how much is fictionalized?

I researched for several months, and then carried on researching along with writing for the whole of the book's creation. It's a period I knew reasonably well already—not like starting to research the Middle Ages!—so it wasn't too difficult. There is so much material from that time, including photos, early film, radio recordings and so on. The framework of the novel—the girls' births, key moments, marriages, family members, etc.—is all true, and around that I have created a story that fits those facts.

Why did you decide to tell the story through the viewpoint of Fliss instead of one of the Guinness girls?

I wanted someone who could see the girls from the outside, the way none of us can see ourselves, and who could see the extent of their privilege, in contrast with the lives of most people. This privilege was, to them, just normal, so I needed an outsider to filter it through. I also wanted a contrast with the lives lived by the Guinnesses. Fliss chooses a more modern kind of destiny—she trains, gets a job, has a career, all in contrast with the Guinnesses, who remained in traditional roles: wives, mothers, muses, patrons, hostesses.

What part of 1920s culture do you wish was still a part of the modern day, if any?

Hmm...I love the fashion—such beautiful dresses! I used to love the frivolity—the way dressing up and going to parties was such a serious business for them. But now that I am older, and a more serious person, I think it's just as well we don't live like that anymore!

Which of the Guinness girls is your favorite and why?

Maureen, because I love her immense energy, resourcefulness, and wit. In her later life, she became a fairly monstrous person—snobbish, rude, selfish—but she was always, I am told by people who knew her well, an incredibly magnetic personality. Also, I don't believe she was always like that. No ten-year-old is like that, so I was very fascinated by who Maureen was as a child, and how she became the caricature of her later life.

This isn't the first book you've written. Was there anything different about the process this time around from your previous writing experiences?

My previous four novels have been contemporary fiction, stories that were entirely invented by me. This time, there was a responsibility I felt towards the known facts—to take these seriously and not mess with them. This meant limits and constraints to what I could do with my story, but I really enjoyed the business of weaving fiction around unalterable facts!

Why did you decide to do a historical fiction novel instead of a biography of the Guinness Girls?

I had written quite a lot of nonfiction articles about the Guinness girls. I wanted so badly to really try and get inside their heads and their lives and really feel free to create the world around them in great detail. I thought a novel was the best way to do that. Also—I confess—I read more novels than nonfiction, and I wanted to write the kind of book I would love to read: that really immersive kind of historical fiction that just transports you to a different world.

What do you like to do when you're not writing?

I like reading books other people have written! I also love being outside—the sea, mountains, forests. I love swimming, running, walking. I coach football [ed's note: also known as soccer]—girls under-11—and I love that too.

What's one thing you want your readers to know about you?

I guess the thing I might be proudest of myself for is that I'm good at not giving up. When things get tough, as they often do, I like the fact that I rarely feel like quitting. Instead, I tend to put one foot in front of the other and keep moving towards whatever it is I want to do—finish a book, finish cancer treatment, try to steer towards something better. This is what I try and instill in my children: that you can't get discouraged just because things don't work out the way you want.



A GLORIOUS HISTORICAL ESSAY

When does the past become history? Is it a decade back? A year? Yesterday? In general, academics agree that the passing of a generation—about twenty years—is required for events to formally become “History.” And it’s always good to have some kind of neat definition. However, for me—for everyone, I’m sure—there is a huge difference between history that is within living memory, even if that is just about within, and the things that took place well beyond that.

I find it difficult to fully imagine myself into Tudor times, or even the 1700s, say, whereas thinking myself into Dublin or London in 1920, 1925, 1930, is not so hard. In fact, that landscape is surprisingly familiar, as I discovered when I began the process of formally researching the lives of the three Guinness girls: Aileen, Maureen, and Oonagh.

Aileen, the eldest, was born in 1904, Maureen in 1907, and Oonagh in 1910. And no sooner did I begin reading Guinness family biographies, and checking the known details of their lives than I realized—I know this. And not in the “I studied this” kind of way (although I did—for my history degree I took courses in modern Irish history, Anglo-Irish relations, early twentieth-century history, and so on), but in an “I feel this” kind of way. It was a sense of recognition for an era that, even though it doesn’t exist anymore, has left an imprint within me because it has been described to me by people who were there, or almost there.

It turns out that there is even a name for this kind of history. It’s called “Twilight History”—or at least that’s what the Irish writer, politician, historian and academic Conor Cruise O’Brien, writing about James Joyce’s wonderful short story “The Dead,” called it.

In his essay on “The Dead,” Cruise O’Brien writes, “There is for all of us a twilight zone of time, stretching back for a generation or two before we were born, which never quite belongs to the rest of history. Our elders have talked their memories into our memories until we come to possess some sense of a continuity exceeding and traversing our own individual being...”*

And he’s absolutely right. The recounting of family memories—my parents’, their parents’ told through them—means that my grandmother’s life, for example, doesn’t feel like “history,” although of course, that’s exactly what it is. She was born in 1903—a year before Aileen Guinness—grew up in Galway and went to teacher training college. A brilliant, formidable and sometimes terrifying national schoolteacher (I’ve met former students of hers on and off through the years), she made her own way in the world until she married, very late in those days, in her early thirties and had her only child at the age of forty-one.

Knowing as I do that she was a supporter of the Gaelic Revival (a cause dear to the heart of Douglas Hyde, the first president of Ireland, and the poet-revolutionary Padraig Pearse as well), a follower of Michael Collins and therefore pro-treaty in the Irish Civil War, these things give me what feels like emotional access to those times, and the certainty that they were not—as history can sometimes seem to be—simply the grand deeds of famous people but also the everyday lives of many ordinary folk.

These ordinary folk live their lives not thinking that they are in “History,” and because of that, they behave as themselves regardless of what’s going on around them. Meaning, they are still preoccupied by the small details of their own daily existences—their individual loves, hopes, fears, and desires, rather than the arc of grand events. Yes, maybe they fiddle while Rome burns, but that’s their prerogative.

This notion of Twilight History is interesting because it can so easily be riddled with historical inaccuracies—any story that is passed down, repeated again and again, usually is; bits are added, left out or changed, to favor a particular narrative. But that doesn’t matter, because the really valuable stuff that’s passed on is the spirit and essence of a time, something that can’t be got by diligent research but has to come seeping slowly in through bits of folklore.

You wouldn’t necessarily rely on Twilight History for facts, but what it does is provide a sense of emotional access. This is what I found when I started delving deep into the early lives of Aileen, Maureen, and Oonagh Guinness. So much already felt within reach—horse-drawn cabs rumbling over the cobbled streets of Dublin, gaslight and coal fires, the lurching typeface of *The Irish Times* announcing “Lawlessness in Ireland” on January 17, 1922, homemade soda bread and porridge, the kind of public disapproval that came with being seen out without a hat.

And if I was missing anything, there were still people for me to talk to who are, themselves, within a generation of living memory. There are no more exact contemporaries of the Guinness girls alive, but there are plenty of people whose parents knew them, and who knew them well in their later lives; who went to parties at Luggala, at Luttrellstown, who knew Maureen in London (lucky for me the three of them were so profligate in the giving of parties—it means the circle of their casual acquaintances is very wide indeed; I have met painters, writers, plumbers, and students whom all went to Guinness parties).

Talking to these people, getting their memories, anecdotes, psychological impressions, all adds up to an understanding of the three girls and the world they lived in. In a way, it’s not so much history, as gossip. Gossip sanctified by the passing of time so that it becomes something else: oral history, or social history, but is really just stories, probably exaggerated, edges blurred until the outline is just an approximation of the original happening, but still retaining a nugget of truth somewhere.

The formal kind of History—let's distinguish it with a capital H—feels like dusty books in archaic language, giving details of long-gone times and places. Exploring the 1910s and 20s in Ireland and the United Kingdom is not like that. It's early films, photographs, fashion magazines, social columns, diaries, novels and family photo albums as well as books.

Of course, I have plenty of freedom because I'm writing novels, not a history book. If I hear a story that interests me about one of the Guinnesses, I can use it, even if I can't confirm the specific details of it—I'm thinking of, for example, the recollection of one man I spoke to that Maureen, who didn't much go in for fond human contact, used to allow her pug dogs to lick the inside of her mouth. That might not appear directly in the book, but it's the kind of detail that, I feel, gives me an insight into her character beyond the well-worn public anecdotes about how she liked to dress up in, say, a fake nose, or the costume of a slatternly maid.

Then of course there is the fact that there is clear continuity in so much that we love now that is directly traceable back to the 1920s: cocktails, jazz, cropped hair, sequins and dropped waists. The animating spirit of the Jazz Age is still very much present, as are the preoccupations. That was the start of the fetishizing of a particular kind of giddy, insouciant, gilded youth, and the beginning of celebrity culture—both defining elements of our own culture.

Finally, in this, the centenary decade, the echoes sound loud and clear. The "Roaring Twenties" followed hot on the heels of World War I and the Spanish flu pandemic. That decade of madcap hedonism was a response to the mud and blood, the death and hiding, of the years that came immediately before it. It was not—far from it—the carefree expression of optimism as it is sometimes portrayed; instead, it was the hysterical enthusiasm of the near-miss, a catch-me-if-you-can spurt of energy—the kind that is very easy to imagine kicking off in a year or so from now when we emerge (we hope) into a post-Covid world.

"The past is never dead. It's not even past," Faulkner said. And he was right. Certainly not this kind of past—this Twilight History that is still accessible to anyone who cares to think deeply about it, to rattle their family cupboards for the recollections and impressions of the generation just gone. And to make those recollections personal; to talk our elders' memories into our own.

* "How Much Did James Joyce Base 'The Dead' on His Own Family?

Colm Tóibín on the Greatest Short Story Ever Written."

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A GLORIOUS BOOK CLUB FOOD PAIRING

**What better food pairing when reading
this book than all things "Guinness"**

The Glorious Guinness Girls is a book that is half set in the world of the Irish War of Independence, half in the glamorous London society of the 1920s, so I've aimed for a menu that reflects both those aspects. The match that best reflects those two things is a Black Velvet cocktail - made from Guinness and Champagne (sparkling wine will work too; half fill a Champagne flute with Guinness from a can then top up with chilled Champagne), so let's start with that. Follow with afternoon tea featuring Guinness bread (loads of recipes online, totally delicious), topped with smoked salmon, cream cheese, pickled cucumber, and dill. Because the bread recipe uses black treacle, you'll find that sweet toppings like butter and jam work just as well. To finish, what about a Baby Guinness? This is actually a shot of coffee liqueur topped with a 1/2 shot of Irish cream liqueur, but it looks like a miniature pint of Guinness.



A GLORIOUS PLAYLIST

Tunes to put you in a glorious mood

There are many beautiful songs from the Irish War of Independence – of which *The Foggy Dew* (try the Sinéad O'Connor version) and the *Kevin Barry* ballad (Leonard Cohen sings it very well) are my favorites.

The 1920s was, of course, the Jazz Age, and London would have been listening to much the same music as America. In the book, I have the Guinness Girls and their friends listening to Al Jolson's exuberant *Sitting On Top Of the World*, Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Field's *I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby* (Louis Armstrong's version preferably, or Lady Gaga's). Ma Rainey's *See See Rider Blues*, from 1925, perfectly captures the poignancy and yearning of the era, as does *Someone To Watch Over Me*, from 1927.

MORE GLORIOUS RECOMMENDATIONS

*For when you're done reading THE GLORIOUS GUINNESS GIRLS
and need more historical fiction in your life*

Movies/ TV

- *Downton Abbey* – this is set between 1912 and 1926, so it's the perfect companion piece to *The Glorious Guinness Girls*; it's the country-house version of their London lives.
- *Bridgerton* (this is set in the Regency period, much earlier than the *Glorious Guinness Girls*, but there is enough similarity to make it a great watch)
- *Bright Young Things* – Stephen Fry's take on Evelyn Waugh's book, *Vile Bodies*, is an exuberant rendering of the Roaring Twenties.
- *The Great Gatsby* – Baz Luhrman's version may be set in America, but it captures a spirit of excess and decadence that was just as alive in London.
- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – again, it's America, not London, but the flavor of the 1920s is very much there.

Books

- For more on the way the Anglo-Irish lived in the final days of the British Ascendancy in Ireland, Molly Keane's *Good Behaviour*, JG Farrell's *Troubles* and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* are all brilliant.
- The novel that immortalised the Bright Young People of London in the 1920s was Evelyn Waugh's first, *Vile Bodies*.
- For wonderfully clever and faithful capturings of the Roaring 1920s, read Nancy Mitford – *The Pursuit Of Love* and *Love In A Cold Climate*.