



2013 WINNER

MAY WE BE FORGIVEN BY A.M. HOMES

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

A.M. Homes lives in New York City and teaches at Princeton University. She is the author of the novels *May We Be Forgiven*, which won the Women's Prize 2013, *This Book Will Save Your Life*, a Richard and Judy pick in 2007, *Music for Torching*, *The End of Alice*, *In a Country of Mothers and Jack*; three collections of short stories, *Things You Should Know*, *The Safety of Objects* and *Days of Awe*; and the highly acclaimed memoir *The Mistress's Daughter*, as well as the travel memoir *Los Angeles: People, Places and the Castle on the Hill*. She is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* and writes frequently on arts and culture for numerous magazines and newspapers

PLOT SUMMARY

Harry has always envied his younger brother George – a high-flying TV executive with two kids, a beautiful home and a covetable wife – but Harry also knows that George is a dangerous man with a murderous temper. When an adulterous kiss at Thanksgiving prompts a chain of unexpected events, George finally loses control, and the result is so shocking that the brothers are hurled into entirely new lives. How will Harry cope with a new family to take care of? And will there be absolution for anyone?

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

A.M. Homes depicts the realities of grief in a knowing and nuanced way in this novel about a 'normal' American family who undergo a horrific trauma.



In the early part of the novel, main character Harry's sister-in-law Jane is murdered by Harry's brother, George. Homes' treatment of Jane's death and its effect on Harry and the children adeptly captures the disjointed feeling familiar to anyone who has lost someone close to them, that the recently dead person will step into the room at any moment and that they are still present in familiar places. Grief is a complex emotion to describe, but moments like Nate's desire to go to an amusement park after his mother's wake (desperate to disconnect from the reality of his emotions) are authentic and truthful.

While the characters grieve, Homes invests the mundane details of life with surreality, such as on page 40 when she shows Harry making dinner for Nate and Ashley: "Spaghetti and frozen broccoli and cream soda and sara lee pound cake. You would almost think things are under control." The process of eating those bland American foods makes us relate to the characters' grief, and desire to block it out with a kind of mindless consumption.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The presence of technology (specifically, phones and TV) seem significant in Homes' depiction of her characters' process of dissociation from society and reality – which, in George's case, leads ultimately to a murderous psychosis.

Nate and Ashley disconnect from their family on their phones while sitting at the dinner table; Harry is separated from his wife Claire by a telephone, which becomes the medium over which his marriage breaks up; he later arranges to have sex with women found on a dating website.

“ MAY WE BE FORGIVEN IS A DAZZLING, ORIGINAL, VISCERALLY FUNNY BLACK COMEDY – A SUBVERSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM. ”

MIRANDA RICHARDSON, CHAIR OF JUDGES 2013

Last, George's work as a TV executive seems to frame his increasing violence and sociopathic behaviour. After the fact that he has murdered Jane in a domestic violence incident, the media also shares news of a number of suits filed against George for sexual harassment in the workplace – a subject that would coincidentally become topical in the real world media in the years following the publication of this novel.

Has technology significantly affected how families relate to each other? Might A.M. Homes be painting the role of telecommunications too darkly in her novel? Is there an argument that today's technology – family WhatsApp groups, watches with tracking devices for children, smart security systems for the home – might increase family members connecting with each other? Or are the potentials for disconnection, cyber bullying and surveillance, especially with the focus on coercive control and domestic violence in this novel, dangerous?



QUESTIONS

What is the relevance of Harry's academic subject specialism of Nixonology to the themes of truth, failure, lying and redemption in the book?

George ends up in a mental health facility after Jane's murder, but Homes also reminds us that his coercive and bullying behaviour existed long before he showed signs of a breakdown. On page 66, Larry says:

“You did a ‘new Jew’ dance, and then your brother said I had to pay him three dollars a week if I wanted to live,”

To which Harry replies,

“You got off easy - I had to give him five,”

Is George mad, or just violent? Was he always violent, and was his murdering Jane always going to happen? Do you think George's job as a powerful TV executive encouraged these manipulative and violent tendencies?

NEXT STEPS

Jane's is a voice we hear all too little from in this novel due to her death early in the narrative; consider writing a few days' worth of entries from her diary.

Is she planning to leave George? How does she feel about the children being away at school? Does she worry about the effect a divorce would have on them? Perhaps you could show Jane planning Nate's bar mitzvah – or write about her feelings for Harry.

For a more involved project, write accounts of the experiences of four of the women George sexually harassed at work, as first-person narratives. Are their experiences similar to each other or different? What did George do to them and what was their response? Do they manage to get any closure or revenge on George? Is their workplace sympathetic to them or does it attempt to cover things up? What are the women's feelings when it becomes known that George has murdered his wife? Do they form a survivor's/victim's group of some kind?

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THIS BOOK WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE BY A.M. HOMES

A LITTLE LIFE BY HANYA YANAGIHARA