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The Half Moon

by Mary Beth Keane



About the Book

From the bestselling author of ASK AGAIN, YES, a masterful novel about a couple in a small town who must navigate the complexities of marriage, family and longing.

Malcolm Gephardt, the handsome and gregarious longtime bartender at the Half Moon, has always dreamed of owning a bar. When his boss finally retires, Malcolm stretches to buy the place. He sees unquantifiable magic and potential in the Half Moon and hopes to transform it into a bigger success, but struggles to stay afloat.

His smart and confident wife, Jess, has devoted herself to her law career. After years of trying for a baby, she is facing the idea that motherhood may not be in the cards for her. Like Malcolm, she feels her youth beginning to slip away and wonders how to reshape her future.

Award-winning author Mary Beth Keane?s new novel takes place over the course of one week when Malcolm learns shocking news about Jess, a patron of the bar goes missing, and a blizzard hits the town of Gillam, trapping everyone in place. With a deft eye and generous spirit, Keane explores the disappointments and unexpected consolations of midlife, the many forms forgiveness can take, the complicated intimacy of small-town living, and what it means to be a family.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens with an epigraph from Louise Erdrich: ?Right and wrong were shades of meaning, not sides of a coin.? How does this quote resonate with the themes of THE HALF MOON?

2. When making updates to the Half Moon upsets the regulars, Malcolm realizes that ?people didn?t want things to be nice, they wanted them to be familiar? (page 7). Does this quote resonate with your experiences of change? Do you think it also applies to marriage?

3. In chapter two, Malcolm wonders: ?What if they hadn?t gotten married so quickly? What if that baby had been born? It was like those *Choose Your Own Adventure* books he used to love as a kid, where you could follow a dozen different paths to a different conclusion, each road forking again and again? (page 48). Discuss these and other ?what ifs? in the book (like *what if* Malcolm had told Jess about his deal with Hugh?). Does this make you think of any of your own ?what if? moments?

4. Jess seems to know about --- and be bothered by --- Malcolm?s interest in fellow bartender Emma, but in Malcolm?s opinion, ?interest wasn?t a crime. Nor was the way his belly tightened when he passed close to [Emma] in the narrow space behind the bar? (page 54). What can couples realistically expect of each other in a long, monogamous marriage? Where do you draw the line for what constitutes cheating?

5. After Jess miscarries at age 25, the doctor tells her and Malcolm that up to 50 percent of all pregnancies, and between 15 and 25 percent of known pregnancies, end in miscarriage (page 48). Did this statistic surprise you? How does society treat miscarriage? Is it something you and your friends or family are comfortable discussing?

6. As Malcolm and Jess discuss the finances of the Half Moon and fertility treatments, he tells her: ?people like you and me --- we can?t afford multiple big dreams. We can only afford one? (page 64). How does money impact the couple?s interactions? How can a relationship sustain conflicting goals and dreams?

7. What does Neil offer Jess that Malcolm can?t, and vice versa? Discuss the moment when Neil tells Jess: ?The minute you make this decision, our lives will be better.... We can be a family? (pages 160?61). What do you think it takes to make a family?

8. What role do secrets play in the novel for Jess, Malcolm, and the patrons and employees of the Half Moon? When truths emerge, how do these characters handle the fallout? Consider the secrets that are kept: Why do you think Jess hasn?t told Malcolm about what happened in San Francisco? How much disclosure do you think we owe to a spouse or partner?

9. When Malcolm wonders whether he could forgive Jess, he shamefully recalls an encounter with another woman at the Half Moon. How do their various infidelities, big and small, impact their marriage in different ways? What does forgiveness look like for them?

10. On several occasions, Jess questions what she knows about Neil?s divorce, as she?s only heard his side of the story. What is your opinion of him? How much can we really know about someone else?s marriage?

11. On page 206, Jess thinks, ?No need to decide anything because it was not real life, not until the snow melted and the power was restored.? How does the isolation caused by the snowstorm impact the events of the story? Do you think things might have ended up differently for Jess and Malcolm without the week of being snowed in? What about ifinstead of living in a small town, where everyone knows everyone?s business, they lived in a big city?

12. Discuss the quote: ?To think that when they first said they loved each other, when they got married, when they bought the house and filled it with furniture and plates and bowls and lamps and all the clutter of domestic life, that all of that was aimed at a future they had no guarantee of reaching? (page 210). What should a couple do when the life they wanted together proves unachievable? How do couples decide whether to stay together or separate? Why do Jess and Malcolm make the decision they do?

13. In wondering who of their friends in Gillam would take her side over Malcolm?s, Jess thinks ?there were those who?d sympathize with following a temptation to its conclusion. There were those who would admire a woman who had a problem and did what she thought might fix it? (page 225). Did you sympathize with one more than the other?

14. Discuss the importance of friendship in the novel. How do Jess and Malcolm?s friends look out for them? What role do you think friends should have when a couple is struggling with their marriage?

15. What did you think of Jess? plan for how she and Malcolm could start over? What would you have done in that situation? Were you surprised by how things ended up?

Author Bio

Mary Beth Keane is the author of five novels, including the *New York Times* bestseller ASK AGAIN, YES. She was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for fiction writing and has received citations from the National Book Foundation, PEN America, and the Hemingway Society. Born in the Bronx to parents from the west of Ireland, she lives in New York with her husband and two sons.

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