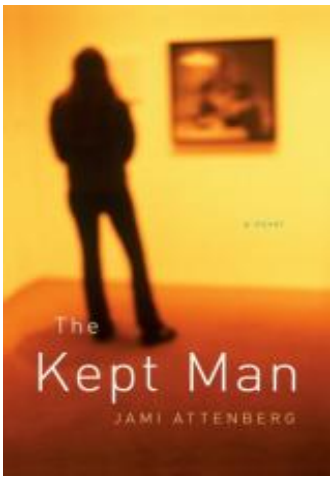
The Kept Man

by Jami Attenberg



About the Book

A riveting debut novel from a rising literary star about a young woman whose husband has fallen into a coma, and her discovery of evidence that casts doubt on their marriage.

Six years ago, Jarvis Miller's husband, an artist whose career was just starting to gain momentum, fell into a coma. And ever since, Jarvis has been waiting. At first, she was waiting for him to wake up so that their happy marriage could be continued. But she's spent too many years of dwindling hope, living as a half-widow, and selling off more and more pieces of his artwork to power the machines that keep him alive. Now, Jarvis has come to admit that she's waiting for her husband to die.

One spring day at the local laundromat, Jarvis meets the members of the Kept Man Club: three handsome, interesting men, all married to breadwinner wives, who gather once a week on laundry day. Their companionship opens her eyes to the possibilities of family and friendship she's been missing for so many years. At the same time, her husband's best friend and his art dealer pressure Jarvis to collect the remainder of his work for a retrospective-a proposition that engenders mixed feelings, since it's usually an honor reserved for the already dead. Sorting through a hidden box of photographs, she uncovers evidence of a shocking betrayal that calls into question her idealized vision of the past.

Told in a spare and utterly compelling narrative voice, **The Kept Man** is a compulsively readable novel about love and loss, one that is sure to establish Jami Attenberg as one of our most dynamic new storytellers.

Discussion Guide

1. Missy?s estimation of the ?kept men? is harsh: ?Not for nothing, Jarvis, but where I come from, we?d call these guys *maricones*.? Do you agree with her assessment? What is your impression of these characters?

2. Jarvis? observations about Williamsburg, Brooklyn --- a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood --- form a running thread throughout the book. Why do you think the author chose to set her story in this location? What do Jarvis? thoughts about her neighborhood reveal about her character? Is there a thematic significance to this setting?

3. Jarvis is fascinated by Sylvie Porter?s series of photographs depicting a cat on the streets of the East Village. Another cat hisses at Jarvis in Martin?s room, and Sylvie Porter later connects the two in her deteriorating mind. Discuss the symbolic importance of the cat, and how it connects to the larger themes of the novel.

4. Jarvis is very aware of appearances: her fondest images of her family revolve around the way they dressed; her first impression of the ?kept men? is based on their looks and their style; her selection of a dress for Scott?s dinner party is calculated to produce a specific effect. How does this focus on appearances shape Jarvis? character? How does it inform her relationship with her husband and his work?

5. At one point, Jarvis reflects on her relationship with her father, asking, ?Is she cruel for abandoning her father? ?the man she knew as her father is no longer there.? There is an exterior, there is a shell, a skin, but inside, he?s gone.? How does this relationship affect the choices Jarvis makes in her life, specifically regarding her husband? What parallels can be drawn between her experience with her father and with Martin?

6. Early on, Mal recounts the story of his brother-in-law, who went fly-fishing in Montana for one weekend and ended up leaving his girlfriend to live there. Near the end, we learn of Martin?s similar disappearance to a cabin along the Snake River in Oregon. What is the significance of these parallel tales to the story and themes of the novel?

7. Jarvis remembers Martin as a man whose ?entire life, every ounce of it, every breath, was committed to creating art.? But she also wonders, ??who was he besides an artist? And who was I to him? Nothing more than part of a palette.? Do you think she is right in this assessment? Overall, what impression of artists and their art does the book leave you with?

8. The story of **The Kept Man** bears obviously similarities to the Terri Schiavo case. Did reading this book affect your opinion on the issues involved? Do you believe that if Jarvis had eventually ?pulled the plug? on her husband that it would have been morally justifiable?

Author Bio

Jami Attenberg is a *New York Times* bestselling author of eight books of fiction, including THE MIDDLESTEINS and ALL GROWN UP; a memoir, I CAME ALL THIS WAY TO MEET YOU; and 1000 WORDS: A Writer's Guide to Staying Creative, Focused, and Productive All Year Round. She is the founder of the annual #1000WordsofSummer project and maintains the popular Craft Talk newsletter year-round. Her work has been published in 16 languages. She lives in New Orleans.

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