ReadingGroupGuides
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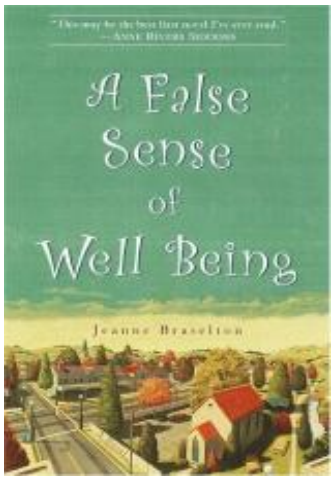
A False Sense of Well Being

by Jeanne Breaselton



About the Book

At thirty-eight, Jessie Maddox subscribes to *House Beautiful*, *Southern Living*, even *Psychology Today*. She has a comfortable life in Glenville, Georgia, with Turner, the most reliable, responsible husband in the world. But after the storybook romance, ?happily ever after? never came. Now the housewife who once wanted to be Martha Stewart before there was a Martha Stewart is left to wonder: Where did the marriage go wrong? Why can?t she stop picturing herself as the perfect grieving widow?

As Jessie dives headlong into her midlife crisis, she is aided and abetted by a colorful cast of characters in the true Southern tradition: her best friend and next door neighbor Donna, who is having a wild adulterous affair with a younger man; Wanda McNab, the sweater-knitting, cookie-baking grandmother who is charged with killing her abusive husband. Then there?s Jessie?s eccentric family. Her younger sister Ellen, born to be a guest on Jerry Springer, has taken her seven-year-old son and squawking pet birds and left her husband ?for good this time? . . . while their mother crosses the dirty words out of library books and alerts everyone to the wonderful bargains at Winn-Dixie, often at the same time. And then there?s the stuffed green headless duck . . .

When a trip home to the small town of her childhood raises more questions than it answers, Jessie is forced to face the startling truth head-on?and confront the tragedy that has shadowed her heart and shaken her faith in love . . . and the future.

From a brilliant new voice in fiction, here is a darkly comic novel full of revelation and insight. The danger of secrets and the power of confession . . . The pull of family, no matter how crazy. . . The fate of wedlock when one can?t find the key . . . Jeanne Braselton weaves these potent themes into a funny, poignant, utterly engaging story of a woman at the crossroads?and the unforgettable journey she must take to get back home.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel opens with Jessie Maddox having fantasies of her husband's untimely death, either by fate or by accident. What has happened in her life to cause this? What do you think she would do, and how would she react, if her fantasies were to come true? Do you ever have similar thoughts about those you love? If so, examine the way your innermost thoughts often conflict with what you believe you want in life.

2. Jessie is the one telling her story. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Jessie's first-person narration? Do you think she's able to remain objective when discussing her unhappiness, or when describing her family and friends? How would the novel be different if it were narrated by her husband Turner?

3. Jessie talks about wanting the perfect marriage and the perfect home. She subscribes to House Beautiful, Southern Living, and Psychology Today, trying to copy decorating ideas and lifestyle tips. She joins the Glenville Society Cotillion, and she and her husband are members of the local country club. Discuss how Jessie is influenced by what she reads in books and magazines, or sees in movies, and how her expectations of love and marriage may be unrealistic. Do you know people who do the same thing? How has she, as she admits, worked to create the life she always dreamed of having? How much of Jessie's dilemma do you believe is based on her desire to keep up with what society expects of her?

4. We know Turner only from the details Jessie reveals, and from the few scenes where he appears. What do you think of him as a husband, and what about Turner hasn't Jessie told us? Do you believe he loves Jessie? What could he be doing to help her through this crisis? Do you think he realizes how unhappy Jessie is? Consider reading Gustave Flaubert's classic novel Madame Bovary, and discuss the similarities and the differences between the characters and the plots of Madame Bovary and **A False Sense of Well Being**.

5. Is Jessie experiencing a typical midlife crisis? If so, what do you believe she should be doing to work through it? If not, what do you think triggered the wave of self-doubt and self-examination she's having? Discuss any time in your life when you may have felt the same way.

6. The novel uses passages from The Book of Common Prayer to introduce certain chapters. Why do you think the author chose The Book of Common Prayer, and what is the significance of each passage to the story that follows? Do you think Jessie, or any of the characters, find any comfort in the passages and prayers that are presented?

7.As a social worker at a mental health clinic, Jessie talks about the power of confession, and wonders if her clients are helped by telling her their secrets. Do you believe confession, as the saying goes, is good for the soul? How do you feel about Jessie as a therapist? Do you think she's helped by the confessions she makes to her friends and family? Discuss how the power of confession is the novel's central theme.

8. Unlike many contemporary novels, in which the male characters are the ones making bad decisions, having affairs, or leaving home, it's the women in this novel who are the ones doing all the misbehaving. What is the significance of this? Discuss the choices these women make and how these choices affect their lives. Are the women who are having affairs or running away from home behaving, in a sense, like men? Do you believe--as does the self-help writer that Jessie listens to on tape--that men and women want the same things but have trouble communicating their wants and needs to

each other? Discuss the changing roles of women over the past few decades, and how this has affected the traditional ideas of marriage and family.

9. Jessie and her friend Donna have different ways of looking at things, especially marriage. Jessie says, in fact, that she feels like she can live vicariously through Donna, because of Donna's affair.

Author Bio

Jeanne Braselton was born and raised in Georgia. She is the adopted daughter of a poet who was designated chief of the Cherokee Nation. While working as a journalist for the Rome News Tribune, she won numerous Georgia Press Association awards. She currently lives in Rome, Georgia, with her husband. **A False Sense of Well-Being** is her first novel.

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