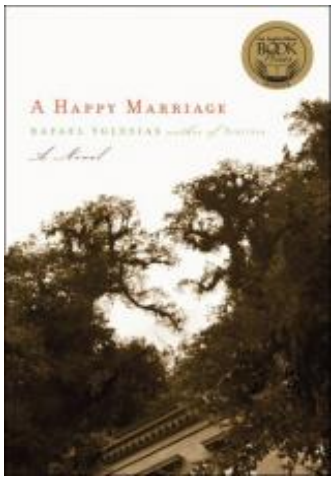
A Happy Marriage

by Rafael Yglesias



About the Book

A Happy Marriage is both intimate and expansive: It is the story of Enrique Sabas and his wife, Margaret, a novel that alternates between the romantic misadventures of the first weeks of their courtship and the final months of Margaret's life as she says goodbye to her family, friends, and children --- and to Enrique. Spanning thirty years, this achingly honest story is about what it means for two people to spend a lifetime together --- and what makes a happy marriage.

Yglesias's career as a novelist began in 1970 when he wrote an autobiographical novel at 16, hailed by critics for its stunning and revelatory depiction of adolescence. **A Happy Marriage**, his first work of fiction in 13 years, was inspired by his relationship with his wife, Margaret, who died in 2004. Bold, elegiac, and emotionally suspenseful, even though we know what happens, Yglesias's beautiful novel will break every reader's heart --- while encouraging all of us with its clear-eyed evocation of the enduring value of marriage.

Discussion Guide

1. The chapters in A Happy Marriage alternate between the first few weeks of Enrique and Margaret's relationship and 29 years later, as Margaret is in the final weeks of her battle with cancer. Why do you think author Rafael Yglesias structured the novel in this way? How might your response to the novel be different if the timeline were linear?

2. Enrique frequently mentions that he's half Jewish and half Spanish. Do you believe his heritage influences him and how he interacts with others?

3. "She was going to die and he was not; in the undeclared war of marriage, it was an appalling victory" (pg. 23). What does Enrique mean by an "undeclared war"? What does the institution of marriage mean to both Enrique and Margaret?

4. After she can no longer fight to stay alive, Margaret makes a series of choices about her death and her funeral and how

she says her goodbyes to the people who are important to her. What do you think about these decisions she makes?

5. On his way to the orphans' dinner, Enrique "wanted to be late....which was odd, because he wanted more than anything to be alone with her" (pg. 57). Why is Enrique so nervous about how others perceive him? What examples are there of Enrique's vanity preventing him from getting what he wants? When, if ever, does he feel comfortable?

6. How did Enrique's early success as an author affect him? "He really was an American Raskolnikov, too intelligent to be reconciled to his unimportance and helpless to escape it" (pg. 64). Why does Enrique believe he cannot escape "unimportance"? Does Margaret feel the same way about him? Does Enrique remind you of any other literary characters?

7. Enrique frequently notes Margaret's blue eyes. What do they represent to him?

8. How does her diagnosis change Margaret's relationship with her mother, if at all?

9. How does the Sabas family compare to the Cohens? Are their reactions to Margaret's illness consistent with their characters?

10. During their first few weeks together, Enrique continuously finds himself unable to consummate their relationship because he says he's "afraid." What frightens him?

11. After years of rejecting Enrique's attempts to give her a pleasing birthday gift, he finally succeeds and Margaret leaves it up to him to choose the site of her grave. What does this mean to Enrique?

12. Were you surprised by Enrique's affair with Margaret's friend, Sally? Were they really in love, or was Enrique longing for his "reckless youth," when he was seemingly free of obligations? Why doesn't he leave with Sally? And what do you think of his choice never to tell Margaret? Is total honesty good or bad for a relationship?

13. Enrique and Margaret have a close, intimate relationship, but at times their intense love for each other almost borders on hate. Discuss their connection and how they strive to make it work. Why did it take Margaret's diagnosis for Enrique to realize what she really meant to his life?

14. "He was allowed to be the free-range artist that she had adventurously married --- except with her; she wanted him trussed up like a roast" (pg. 252). Was Margaret really this controlling? If so, was she aware of how her behavior affected Enrique?

15. Margaret tells her husband, "I'm not like you. It took me a while to find out. I don't need to paint to be happy. I'm happy. Here. With you" (pg. 295). What does her art mean to Margaret, and why is her work so important to Enrique?

16. "He said his paltry goodbye and she was deaf to it" (pg. 358). Why does Enrique wait so long to tell her what she's meant to him?

17. Who or what is the love of Enrique's life?

Author Bio

Rafael Yglesias is an American novelist and screenwriter. He dropped out of high school upon publication of his first novel in 1972 at age 17. He is the author of nine novels, including **Dr. Neruda's Cure For Evil** and **Fearless** , which he adapted for the screen. He also wrote the screenplays for *Death And The Maiden*, *Les Misérables*, *From Hell*, and *Dark Water*. He has two grown sons and lives in New York's Greenwich Village.

Critical Praise

"[A] devastatingly raw appraisal of a nearly 30-year marriage...heart-wrenching."

A Happy Marriage

by Rafael Yglesias

Publication Date: July 7, 2009
Hardcover: 384 pages
Publisher: Scribner
ISBN-10: 1439102309
ISBN-13: 9781439102305