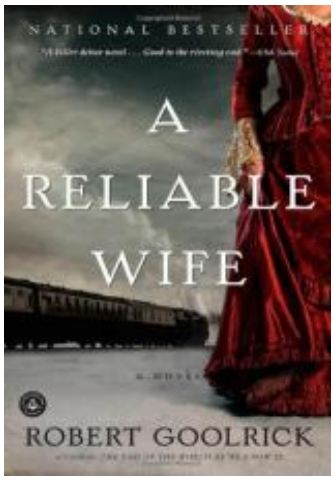
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

A Reliable Wife

by Robert Goolrick



About the Book

Rural Wisconsin, 1909. In the bitter cold, Ralph Truitt, a successful businessman, stands alone on a train platform waiting for the woman who answered his newspaper advertisement for "a reliable wife." But when Catherine Land steps off the train from Chicago, she's not the "simple, honest woman" that Ralph is expecting. She is both complex and devious, haunted by a terrible past and motivated by greed. Her plan is simple: she will win this man's devotion, and then, ever so slowly, she will poison him and leave Wisconsin a wealthy widow. What she has not counted on, though, is that Truitt --- a passionate man with his own dark secrets --- has plans of his own for his new wife. Isolated on a remote estate and imprisoned by relentless snow, the story of Ralph and Catherine unfolds in unimaginable ways.

With echoes of **Wuthering Heights** and **Rebecca**, Robert Goolrick's intoxicating debut novel delivers a classic tale of suspenseful seduction, set in a world that seems to have gone temporarily off its axis.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel?s setting and strong sense of place seem to echo its mood and themes. What role does the wintry Wisconsin landscape play? And the very different, opulent setting of St. Louis?

2. Ralph?s and Catherine?s story frequently pauses to give brief, frequently horrific glimpses into the lives of others. Ralph remarks on the violence that surrounds them in Wisconsin, saying, ?They hate their lives. They start to hate each other. They lose their minds, wanting things they can?t have.? How do these vignettes of madness and violence contribute to the novel?s themes?

3. Catherine imagines herself as an actress playing a series of roles, the one of Ralph?s wife being the starring role of a lifetime. Where in the novel might you see a glimpse of the real Catherine Land? Do you feel like you ever get to know this woman, or is she always hidden behind a façade?

4. The encounter between Catherine and her sister Alice is one of the pivotal moments of the novel. How do you view these two women after reading the story of their origins? Why do the two sisters wind up on such different paths? Why does Catherine ultimately lose hope in Alice?s redemption?

5. The idea of escape runs throughout the novel. Ralph thinks, ?Some things you escape... You don?t escape the things, mostly bad, that just happen to you.? What circumstances trap characters permanently? How do characters attempt to escape their circumstances? When, if ever, do they succeed? How does the bird imagery that runs through the book relate to the idea of imprisonment and escape?

6. ?You can live with hopelessness for only so long before you are, in fact, hopeless,? reflects Ralph. Which characters here are truly hopeless. Alice? Antonio? Ralph himself? Do you see any glimmers of hope in the story?

7. Why, in your opinion, does Ralph allow himself to be gradually poisoned, even after he?s aware of what?s happening to him? What does this decision say about his character?

8. Why does Catherine become obsessed with nurturing and reviving the ?secret garden? of Ralph?s mansion? What insights does this preoccupation reveal about Catherine?s character?

9. Does Catherine live up in any way to the advertisement Ralph places in the newspaper (p. 20)? Why or why not?

10. Did you have sympathy for any of the characters? Did this change as time went on?

11. At the onset of **A Reliable Wife** the charactersare not good people. They have done bad things and have lived thoughtlessly. In the end how do they find hope?

12. The author directly or indirectly references several classic novels --- by the Brontë sisters, Daphne DuMaurier and Frances Hodgson Burnett, among others. How does **A Reliable Wife** play with the conventions of these classic Gothic novels? Does the book seem more shocking or provocative as a result?

Author Bio

Robert Goolrick is the author of the bestselling novels A RELIABLE WIFE, HEADING OUT TO WONDERFUL and THE FALL OF PRINCES, and the acclaimed memoir THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT. He lives and works in Baltimore.

Critical Praise

"**A Reliable Wife** is most definitely a bodice-ripper disguised as literary fiction? First-time novelist Goolrick is a fine, masterful writer."

A Reliable Wife

by Robert Goolrick

Publication Date: March 31, 2009
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 291 pages
Publisher: Algonquin Books
ISBN-10: 1565125967
ISBN-13: 9781565125964