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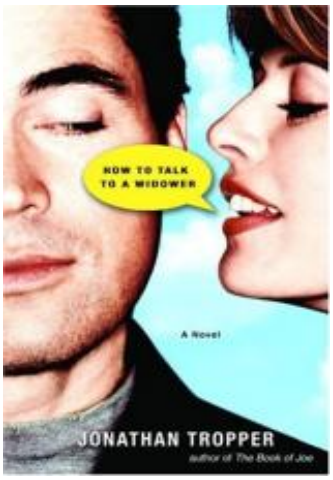
How to Talk to a Widower

by Jonathan Tropper



About the Book

When twenty-seven year old Doug Parker traded in his bachelor pad for a house in the suburbs, complete with a teenaged stepson, he never expected that two years later he would suddenly lose the woman who meant everything to him. Without beautiful, confident Hailey to guide him through the challenges of now becoming a true surrogate father to her son Russ, Doug is on his own to navigate their new course.

And while he knows he can?t travel back to the way things were, it will take a bossy twin sister under his roof, and some colorful mistakes, before Doug will realize how far he has come, and appreciate how far he will go.

Discussion Guide

1. Doug suffered a tragic and sudden loss, but in the fall-out of this event hasn?t always behaved the way one would hope to if in his shoes. Do you empathize with Doug or is his self-destructive behavior a detriment to his character? What allowances would you give to someone who is grieving, and when do their actions become unforgivable?

2. What are Doug?s views on marriage both before and after meeting Hailey? Do they change after he loses his spouse? Do you foresee him eventually remarrying?

3. Following his stroke, Doug?s father underwent a personality change. Describe how this changed his relationship with his family, especially with his son. Does Doug see him as a role model; why or why not? Discuss the parallels between father and son after a traumatic event.

4. How would the story be different if it were not told in the first-person narrative? Is Doug?s omniscient perspective at the heart of the novel? How would the tone change if it was being told from someone outside looking in at Doug?

5. How does the novel?s suburban setting play a role? What is the author?s attitude about living in the suburbs? Do you think the portrayal of the town is meant to be satirical?

6. The author is a man?were you reminded of this while reading the novel? Would a female author writing this story have as effectively portrayed the macho attitude and competitiveness that exists between the male characters?

7. ?I had a wife. Her name was Hailey. Now she?s gone. And so am I.? This passage appears on pages 74, 141, 282, 329, and 330 and serves as a mantra. When Doug repeats it, do you think this ?reality check? provides him with comfort or is it destructive to his recovery? Does its? meaning, or his reasons for evoking the mantra, evolve?

8. Do you feel that Doug overcomes his grief? Does it change him; if so, how? Does grieving necessarily change a person? Can it be treated like other ailments that one conquers, or is it a permanent part of the sufferer, something that continues to live within them, ever changing but present?

9. Discuss the significance of setting. How are family dynamics illustrated by their surroundings and locale? Is Hailey?s home and her belongings another character that haunts this story?the bra left hanging on the bathroom doorknob, the bottles of perfume collecting dust on her dresser?

10. How do the author and his protagonist use humor both in the sense of it being a literary tool, and as a way the characters relate to each other?

11. Doug?s extended family is as endearing as they are dysfunctional. How do they compare to your ideal definition of a family?

12. Compare Doug?s relationships with his two sisters?Claire, his twin, and Debbie, the youngest. What role does being a twin serve in Doug?s life? How does Debbie?s wedding bring out the individual struggles of many of the characters in the novel?

13. Discuss betrayal as it manifests itself across a wide range of connections?between spouses, friends, and siblings.

14. ?The course of true love is never straight.? (page 338) This is true for several of the characters. Do you think it is a universal truth? Is love so simple that people turn it into something which is complicated, or is it as complex as the people it involves?

15. Are you optimistic at the end of the novel that life will improve for Doug?

Author Bio

Jonathan Tropper is the author of ONE LAST THING BEFORE I GO, HOW TO TALK TO A WIDOWER, EVERYTHING CHANGES, THE BOOK OF JOE and PLAN B. He lives with his family in Westchester, New York, where he teaches writing at Manhattanville College. He is currently adapting THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU as a feature film for Warner Brothers Studios and is an Executive Producer and co-creator of the Cinemax series ?Banshee.?

Critical Praise

"A portrait of a modern guy in crisis? Alternately flippant and sad."

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