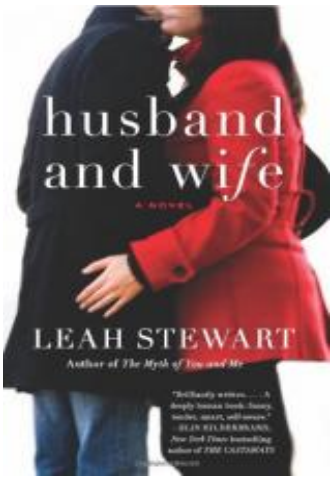
# Husband and Wife

by Leah Stewart




## About the Book

Sarah Price has never regretted trading her MFA for a steady job so that her husband, Nathan, could write fiction. But at age 35, her world is turned upside-down by a shocking revelation: Nathan's upcoming novel, **Infidelity**, is based on fact. Reeling from his betrayal, Sarah is plagued by dark questions. How well does she really know her husband? More important, how well does she know herself?

For answers, Sarah looks back to her artistic twentysomething self to try to understand what exactly has happened to her dreams. And so begins her quest to discover which version of herself is the essential one --- the artist, wife, mother, or someone else entirely --- an eye-opening journey that leads Sarah hundreds of miles away from her marriage and back to herself.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** What is the significance of the title --- what does it mean to be a "husband and wife?" How do we reconcile our romantic ideals about marriage with the mundane realities of sorting socks, changing dirty diapers, cooking dinner?

**2.** Describe Sarah and Nathan's marriage. Is this husband and wife a good fit? How did marriage change them from when they first met? Does marriage have to transform us as individuals? How do we retain who we once were --- and the promise of the dreams we once had --- as the years pass? Should we even want to?

**3.** Infidelity is the catalyst for the events that unfold in Husband and Wife. How do you define infidelity? It is commonly accepted that having sex with another person beside your mate is cheating. But is harboring romantic feelings for someone other than your partner infidelity as well? How would you compare the two?

**4.** Why did Nathan cheat? Why did he confess? Was he right to tell Sarah about his infidelity? Are there some secrets

partners should keep to themselves?

**5.** Talk about Sarah's reaction to Nathan's news. Are you sympathetic to her response? She, too, has a secret --- one involving feelings for another man --- that she has been keeping from her husband for years. What affect does this have on her marriage and the events that unfold? Did Nathan's behavior give her license to act as she did, or do you think she might have turned to Rajiv at some point even if Nathan never cheated?

**6.** After he confesses the affair, Nathan tells Sarah that their future --- the marriage, the publication of his book --- is hers to decide. Why did he give her this power? Should he have? Did she want this control?

**7.** At the beginning of the story, Sarah reveals a little about herself. "Now I'm thirty-five, and these days most people would call me a working mother, a term I don't much like. That I have a job and two small children is a better, if less succinct, way to put it." Having gotten to know her over the course of the novel, why does the term "working mother" bother her? Do you think it's an accurate description? What's the difference between being a working mother and having a job with children?

**8.** She also shares insights into the path her life has taken and its impact on her relationship. "When we met, I was a poet. When Nathan confessed, I was a mother, a business manager, a wife. I'm not saying I held this against him. I'm saying he held it against me." Do you agree with her assessment?

**9.** What is your opinion of Sarah? What kind of a wife and mother is she? Why did she stop writing? Does Sarah bear any responsibility for her husband's betrayal? Do we choose our roles --- victim, cheater, responsible one, free spirit, artist, employee --- or are they thrust upon us?

**10.** What is Sarah and Nathan's relationship with their elderly neighbors? When she learns they have been married for 43 years, Sarah wonders, "Was this a good thing? A bad thing? Just a fact?" How would you answer her? Should marriage last a lifetime?

**11.** What role do their best friends, Helen and Smith, play in the story? What about the couple they brought together, Alex and Adam? Their neighbors, the Dodsons? What do we learn about Sarah and Nathan through them?

**12.** Sarah ponders Americans' ambivalence and confusion about growing up. "We say that growing up is all about disappointment, even as we insist to our young that anything is possible. ?Follow your dreams,' we say, and then we spend our free time making fun of the blinkered contestants on American Idol." Why do we associate adulthood and disappointment? What does it mean to "follow your dream" or to "do what you want"? Should we encourage ourselves to seek fulfillment if it may hurt others?

**13.** Sarah thinks of herself as a grown up. Is she? What does being an adult mean? How does aging --- and the experiences that go with it --- color our outlook on life? How do we cope when the realities of middle life don't match up with the dreams of our youth?

**14.** Husband and Wife also touches on the idea of happiness. What is happiness? Are we too focused as a society on the notion of happiness? Why? Are Sarah and Nathan happy? Were they before Nathan's confession? Is happiness possible after infidelity?

**15.** Why does Sarah go to Austin? What does Rajiv offer her that Nathan does not? Do you think Sarah treated Rajiv fairly? What about Nathan? Does he deserve fairness or consideration in light of what he's done?

**16.** What do you think of Nathan? Were you angry with him? Sympathetic? Did you understand his motivations? Do you believe he loves Sarah? Does Sarah love him? Why do we hurt the people we say we love? What are your impressions of Rajiv?

**17.** Does Sarah ultimately forgive Nathan's transgression --- is she capable of forgiveness? How do you think Nathan would react if he knew of Sarah's own betrayal? Why doesn't she tell him? Do you think she may ever confess to him?

**18.** At the end of the novel, do you think Sarah made the right choice? Should she have left Nathan? Will their relationship last? What lessons did she ultimately learn about herself, her husband, and marriage itself? What did you learn? Do you think Husband and Wife an accurate portrayal of modern relationship?

## Author Bio

Leah Stewart is the critically acclaimed author of THE NEW NEIGHBOR, THE HISTORY OF US, HUSBAND AND WIFE, THE MYTH OF YOU AND ME and BODY OF A GIRL. She received her BA from Vanderbilt University, and her MFA from the University of Michigan. The recipient of a Sachs Fund prize and an NEA Literature Fellowship, she teaches in the creative writing program at the University of Cincinnati and lives in Cincinnati with her husband and two children.

Photo Credit: Jason Sheldon

## Critical Praise

"Stewart creates a crisis of faith where adult reality collides with youthful dreams. The writing is tactile, elemental, even comical, providing readers with a situation that could so easily be their own."

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