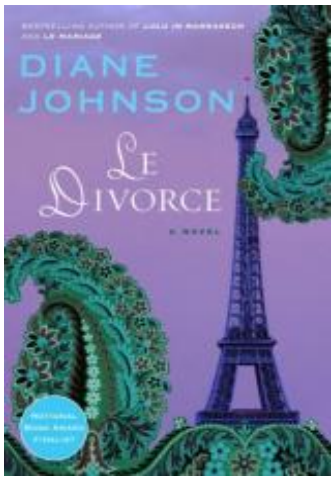
Le Divorce

by Diane Johnson



About the Book

Diane Johnson keeps getting better and better. Just three years after **Le Divorce** was published to critical acclaim, earning a National Book Award nomination, the bestselling author returned with **Le Mariage**, an intoxicating and clever new novel once again set against the backdrop of her beloved Paris. Over the course of her thirty-year writing career, Johnson has been steadily gaining a devoted readership. This guide discusses seven of her witty, stylish, and morally astute novels.

Though Johnson?s novels run the gamut in geographical setting, protagonist, and even time period, they are unmistakably of a piece. Her critically acclaimed narrative style makes each scene unshakably real for us, and, more than just presenting a scene, she transmits the feelings and atmosphere of each situation to her readers. A skilled travel writer and essayist, Johnson excels at conveying the look and feel of exotic locations, be they Paris of Persia (Iran) or, perhaps most foreign of all to many Americans, California.

Burning, Johnson?s earliest of this collection, is also perhaps the most unique. Unlike most of Johnson?s effortlessly beautiful characters, Bingo Edwards is acknowledged by everyone, herself and her husband included, to be homely and middle-aged. Her faithful husband admires her for her intelligence though, and, of all the characters, Barney and Bingo feel the most compunction about committing adultery; yet even the Edwardses find themselves succumbing to the potent mixture of curiosity, boredom, and lust that seems to overcome all of Johnson?s characters. In **Health and Happiness**, a senior professor of medicine with a beautiful, supportive wife is smitten by a comatose woman. In **Persian Nights** and **The Shadow Knows**, young wives, chafing under the burdens of homemaking responsibilities, turn to a colleague of their husbands for support and escape. In **Lying Low**, however, we do see a character who has successfully resistedt he bonds of love, a former dancer who is considerably older than she appears, whose perseverance has brought even fewer benefits than those earned by the rash actions of others. **Le Divorce**, Johnson?s first novel set in France, follows a smart, sexy American abroad where, on a visit to her pregnant stepsister whose French husband has left her for another woman, she tries to keep her perspective as cultures and human passions collide.

From first to last, Diane Johnson illustrates that it is the woman who suffers love more deeply. From Magda, who comes close to losing her life, to N, who loses her home and almost her sanity, to Max, who loses her children, it is the woman who is cast out or beaten or ridiculed for the sake of love. Even when their actions verge on insanity, the male characters are protected and excused by society at large, and a little irresponsibility or callousness is not questioned. What continues to be Johnson?s triumph is that she writes strong, resilient, resolute female characters who find hidden reserves of strength and determination just when they need it most, and who persevere in the face of danger, betrayal, loss, and adversity. And always, their stories are told in an engaging, witty, and utterly believable style.

Le Divorce, a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction and a national bestseller, is Diane Johnson's delightfully witty account of the adventures of two sisters from California who make a modern pilgrimage to the City of Light. Isabel Walker, film school dropout, arrives in Paris to help her older step-sister Roxeanne during the final weeks of her second pregnancy. Isabel intends to use the trip to delay getting her life in gear and to pick up a little French culture, though she can't be bothered to learn the language. Arriving just as Roxy's perfect husband, Charles-Henri, walks out on her, Isabel quickly undergoes a crash course in the secret codes and intricacies of French social behavior.

Many critics were quick to find similarities and differences between Isabel Archer, heroine of Portrait of a Lady, and Isabel Walker, Johnson's heroine. While both women are ignorant of European social mores, Johnson makes it clear her Isabel is neither innocent nor easily taken advantage of. In contrast, Roxy, a part-time poet and full-time romantic, is the woman in need of guidance. Her French husband has fallen in love with another woman, a Czech sociologist named Magda who is also married to an American, and wants a divorce. Roxy's in-laws, the powerful and prestigious de Persand family, exert subtle but firm control over her decision whether or not to grant it. In favor of maintaining cordial relations for the sake of the grandchildren, the de Persands urge Roxy to reconsider. Impeccably courteous Madame de Persand, while exasperated at her son's foolishness, warns Roxy against making a mistake. "Why ruin your life and lose your social position?" Meanwhile, Isabel steps out of her role as mere observer of the de Persands and into a torrid affair with l'oncle Edgar, a prominent politician, who is married and over forty years her senior.

Complicating matters is the disposition of a family heirloom, a painting appreciated only by Roxy until it is discovered to be worth millions. In the midst of a variety of schemes, the stakes are suddenly raised by a crime of passion which disrupts everyone's motives and plans. Not since Edith Wharton penned her brilliant portraits of Americans abroad has an American novelist so perfectly captured the possibilities and perils of succumbing to the allure of Paris.

Discussion Guide

1. Clara Holly Cray is an Oregon-born former actress who has lived in France for more than a decade as the wife of a renowned if reclusive Polish film director. She "remembered her roots, would rather not, and almost never went back to the U.S." Yet she belongs "very much to the American world that exists like a specialized form in a complex ecosystem, dependent on its hosts but apart from them" (1). As the quintessential American in Paris, does this mean that Clara remains an outsider in both worlds, never completely belonging to either? Does she believe that she can never be truly accepted by the French, a point that is driven home when she is arrested by the French authorities for allegedly desecrating a national monument? How, if at all, do her feelings about the French change during the course of the novel? Does she become disillusioned with her adopted country?

2. Anne-Sophie is "the American community?s ideal young Frenchwoman" (8). Yet she is engaged to Tim Nolinger, a part-American, part Belgian journalist, of whom her mother, the celebrated novelist Estelle d?Argel, does not wholly approve. How does Anne-Sophie reconcile her own ambitions and expectations of her future with those of Estelle, who clearly has a powerful influence on her daughter? In fact, it is from Estelle that Anne-Sophie "had two versions of maternal lore on how to lead life. On the one hand were the lessons of the real life Anne-Sophie saw being lived by her mother and father, her brother and herself; on the other was the general philosophy she found expressed in Estelle?s works, which represented a reality at once more sophisticated, more cynical, and more exacting" (9). That Anne-Sophie has chosen to "pattern her behavior and beliefs on things her mother had written" reveals that, at heart, she believes more in an ideal of life than in what can turn out to be a disappointing everyday existence. Does she fear that marriage to Tim, "a man given to irony and no illusions" (6) will destroy her own illusions? Or that wedded life won?t live up to them?

3. Clara knows she doesn?t love her husband, at least "not in that swept-away, sexual way she tended to doubt really existed" (57). Yet she embarks on an adulterous affair with Antoine de Persand. Clearly, Clara does believe in love. Is she deceiving herself? Or trying to justify her choices in life? Serge Cray is given to fits of temper, stony silences and, at times, verbal abuse in front of others. Does Clara feel trapped in her marriage because of their deaf son, Lars? Does she remain in her rather passive existence because of guilt over being born beautiful and choosing the easy way out?marriage to an older, rich and famous man? Is her affair with de Persand revenge against her husband? Or an expression of true love?

4. When Clara is arrested for "desecrating a national monument," "the American community draws together, united in excited indignation" (144). Yet, in spite of this show of solidarity (in particular from the political front?"Democrats in Paris and Republicans Abroad"), these foreigners on French soil cannot prevent Clara from being "dragged off by French authorities" (141). Would a Frenchwoman (or man) be treated in the same way? Does this reflect the French community?s real feelings toward the Americans in their midst? Do Americans have (or believe they have) fewer rights in France than they would in their native country? Or is this simply the way of French justice, which cannot be speeded up, imbued as it is with the "French sense of time, stately and historical, and the French certainty that events will unfold in their preordained way?" (145).

5. Johnson?s novels often mask a deeper moral complexity. In Le Mariage, how do the Americans differ from their French counterparts in their perceptions of and attitudes toward, morality, i.e., adultery, and crime, i.e., theft, wrongful arrest, murder? Are they more judgmental? Upright? Outraged? Less tolerant and blasé??

6. When Anne-Sophie accompanies Tim and some of the others to Oregon, it is her first time in America. What does she come away from the trip with? Does it change her or her beliefs about America in any fundamental way?

7. Delia Sadler, an antiques dealer in Paris, tells Clara, a fellow Oregonian, "I would say you?re disgusting if it wasn?t rude to say it?disgusting in the sense of rolling in luxury and giving nothing back" (242). She goes on to say that "no one here knows anything about America, and the Americans who live here are the worst, they forget what it?s like at home where people are hungry and angry, and the whole country is shifting like a big mountain with some sort of geologic activity pushing up from inside it, it?s just going to split open like a big baked potato. No other American I?ve met here can imagine it, and no French person can imagine it, no way" (241). Delia seems to be saying that both cultures have little regard for human suffering. Is she making a statement about all people and all cultures? What does she say about Americans in America? Clara thinks she?s right, even though it gives the lie to the privileged life she?s been leading in France. Is the author making a statement about the human condition in general, that cruelty and suffering will always exist, try as we might to prettify our lives with the superficial trappings of wealth and position?

8. **Le Mariage** concludes with the wedding of Anne-Sophie and Tim. Do they seem excited? Resigned? Do the other protagonists, i.e., Clara, find some measure of contentment and/or acceptance in the end?

Author Bio

Diane Johnson's life has been at least as exciting as any of her heroines', filled with international travel and critical acclaim in whatever medium she deems worthy of her efforts. Born in 1934 in Moline, Illinois, Johnson's childhood was happy without being uneventful. Johnson's father, a high school principal, lost his job but not his honor when he exposed plagiarism committed by the daughter of the Superintendent of Schools. After high school, Diane attended Stephens, an academy for future airline stewardesses where teachers encouraged her to write, but left school in 1953 for a 'Los Angeles' marriage to a professor of medicine.

Twelve years later, Johnson terminated the union, having gained a Ph.D. in English from UCLA and "four wonderful children." Simultaneously, her first book, Fair Game, was published. Johnson's reputation continued to grow with the 1968 publication of Loving Hands at Home-"my discontented wife novel, about a Mormon family." In 1970, Johnson penned the timely Burning, an incisive novel chronicling the experiences of a staid, conformist married couple thrown in

amongst the hippies, drug-addicts, psychiatrists, and firemen of the Bel Air hills. Next, Johnson took a short sabbatical from novels to write the National Book Award-nominated Lesser Lives, a fascinating biography of Mary Ellen Meredith, wife of writer George Meredith, and a poet in her own right, though she often used her husband's name to get her works published. In 1973, Johnson's first short story, "An Apple, An Orange," was included in the annual O. Henry collection of Best Short Stories.

In 1974, The **Shadow Knows** was released, garnering major praise from all sides. Director Stanley Kubrick was so impressed by the novel's taut psychological suspense and depiction of a person dealing with irrational occurrences that he chose her to write the screenplay for his next horror blockbuster, "The Shining." In 1978, **Lying Low** was hailed as surpassing **The Shadow Knows**, with its skillfully rendered atmosphere of foreboding and malice, and its violent and tragic denouement which managed to be surprising even though the events of the book led inexorably towards it. Also in 1978, Johnson spent three months in Iran with her second husband, Dr. John Murray, under a medical school exchange program. Taking another break from fiction, in 1982, Johnson gathered several literary portraits, reviews, and review essays in to **Terrorists and Novelists**, and in 1983 composed another biography, **Dashiell Hammett: A Life**, with the authorization and help of Lillian Hellman.

Johnson used her experiences in Iran as the basis for **Persian Nights**. Drawing comparisons to E.M. Forster's Passage to India, Johnson depicted, through the eyes of a typical American housewife, the collapse of Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi's regime. In 1988, based on the excellence of **Persian Nights**, as well as the rest of her body of work, Johnson was awarded "The Mildred and Harold Strauss Livings," which consists of a $50,000 yearly stipend to allow its recipients to devote their time exclusively to writing. In 1990, Johnson again used experiences relating to her husband's work in **Health and Happiness**. Set in San Francisco, **Health and Happiness** shows the inner workings of a large hospital complex from the differing viewpoints of MDs, RNs, employees, volunteers, and patients. 1993 brought the publication of **Natural Opium: Some Travelers' Tales**, a collection of short stories narrated by D., who is accompanied by her doctor husband, J., giving a sense that these tales are more than a little autobiographical.

In 1997, **Le Divorce** was published by Dutton and became a national best-seller and a National Book Award Finalist. She now divides her time between Paris and San Francisco, continuing to soak up culture and offer wry observations as a travel writer, essayist, and book reviewer for numerous publications, including **The New York Times Book Review**. Interviewed by **The New York Times** as a consummate example of an expatriate writer, Johnson stands by her purpose, "I'm still writing about Americans for Americans." Johnson's latest work, **Le Mariage** (now a Dutton hardcover), will be published by Plume in paperback in 2001.

Critical Praise

"Delightful...This charming tale knows exactly what to say. "

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