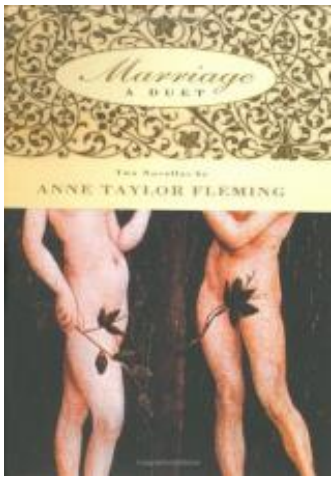
Marriage: A Duet

by Anne Taylor Fleming



About the Book

These deeply moving novellas offer a unique perspective on infidelity, bringing into sharp focus the complications and consequences created by spouses who -- despite their genuine bond of love -- are unfaithful to one another.

In the first novella, *A Married Woman*, Caroline, a middle-aged woman, keeps a careful vigil over her husband William's death bed. While frightened by the idea of losing her soulmate and lifelong companion, Caroline confronts another startling reality: she feels a kind of rebirth through his passing. The later years of her marriage were tainted -- he had fallen in love with a younger woman but renounced his passions for the sake of the family.

In the second novella, *A Married Man*, David -- husband, father, and businessman -- finds his sense of well-being and achievement damaged by his wife Marcia's betrayal: a one-night affair, which she regrets but does not conceal from him. When Marcia and David cannot reclaim the daily routine of a happy marriage, they seek help together from a popular television therapist.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the first few pages of *A Married Woman*, keeping in mind the information Fleming provides about the characters. What are your first impressions of "Mom" (Caroline), Kate and Stevie? What do you learn about William? Who is narrating?

2. What, if any, is the symbolism of William being unable to speak? How do you react to Caroline's dyeing her hair in the hospital bathroom?

3. Choose a paragraph and discuss how Fleming use language, descriptions, location, style, sentence structure, and paragraph length to reveal action and emotion. How is humor employed in the story?

4. What is Caroline's reaction to her husband's affair? What is your opinion about William's affair? For Caroline, why would there be "no scenes, not on her part"? Is she passive, or is something else going on? Discuss what Caroline means by being "a prisoner of her secret." (page 37).

5. Look at the paragraph that begins on the bottom of page 45, "She finally was able to go in . . ." Articulate what Caroline's feelings are about her life. What would you say to her if you could talk to her?

6. Consider the idea that for Caroline, "everything was suspended," and trace how this is conveyed in the story. How is Caroline's life shaped by William's affair? Share any other words or phrases that stand out for you about how Caroline's sense of reality get eroded. How successful is Fleming's articulation of Caroline's feelings?

7. What is Caroline's experience of sex in her marriage? What does it represent? What is William's sexual relationship with Caroline?

8. How is Caroline's anger communicated? Discuss what it means that Caroline "knew how to play the part: the wife who'd been left . . . this she didn't know how to play: the wife of the man who'd stayed" (page 64). Do you think she's fooling herself here? Did she in fact "play" the wife of a man who stayed? Why?

9. Consider the possibility that April was the one who dumped William. Why doesn't this cross Caroline's mind? Why do you think Caroline does not share her anger and resentment with William?

10. Why do you think Caroline looked at houses as a reaction to William's leaving for that weekend? What does looking at real estate represent to her? Discuss whether or not you think this is a good metaphor for someone in Caroline's position, and why.

11. On page 70, Caroline is described as "married to the nerve endings." What does this mean? What do you think is the "particular peril" of this state? At what point in the story does Caroline say that she was responsible for the "daily squandering of love" (page 71)? What does she mean? Share whether or not you agree, and why.

12. Look at the hospital scenes and Caroline's observations about the hospital routine. If you've spent much time in one, how do you feel about Fleming's evocation of the hospital experience? Share any hospital description or observation that stands out in *A Married Woman* and why and how it affects you.

13. Discuss your reaction to the news that April had been dead for many years. Does this fact change the story for you? Does it change your feelings for Caroline and William? Why does Caroline choose not to tell her children about April and William?

14. Who is narrating in *A Married Man*? From who's perspective is the story told?

15. Comparing the two stories in Marriage: A Duet, what are some of the reasons that David (in A Man's Marriage) can reveal his emotions while Caroline (in A Woman's Marriage) cannot?

16. On page 154, David muses about "old stereotypes about women being more forgiving and men more possessive." Is this true? Consider the affairs in both stories and discuss whether or not this idea has merit. How does Fleming create a man's and a woman's perspective of being cheated on? What interests you about having these two stories in one book?

17. Trace how David deals with Marcia's fling. Compare and contrast the coping mechanisms to the cheating in both stories in Marriage: A Duet, for example, David's use of sarcasm and Caroline's quiet. Which character do you relate to, and why?

18. Is David's expectation of a solid marriage unreasonable (Page 98)? How is his reality affected by his wife's philandering? Discuss the manifestation and utility of both David's sarcasm and his paranoia.

19. What kind of person is Marcia? What kind is David?

20. What is David's experience of sex in his relationship with Marcia? What is Marcia's? How does sex fit into their marriage?

21. What is it about the idea of Marcia in the back seat of a car that haunts David so much? Why is the act of cheating so distressing to the partner/spouse? Discuss the idea that often the act itself becomes more focused on than why the cheating happens. Why is this?

22. Looking at page 130, what does David mean when he says, "You weren't as sick as your secrets. You were as sick as your truths"? Share whether or not you agree, and why. Why can't David forgive Marcia? Did Marcia, in fact, cheat? What constitutes cheating?

23. Why is David so antagonistic towards therapy? Is this warranted? Why is Marcia so welcoming of therapy?

24. On page 157, David says that he normally loves coming home to an empty house, "waiting pleasurably in the silence for the car to drive in." Discuss how this is related to Caroline's "everything is suspended" perception in *A Married Woman*.

25. Why do you think that David goes to the forgiveness group? What happens there, and why does he run out?

26. Looking at *A Married Man*, why do you think that Marcia strays? In *A Married Woman*, why does William stray? Why don't Caroline and David stray? What, if any, were the warning signs that the cheaters were going to cheat? Discuss whether or not these stories depict what actually happens when infidelity occurs, and why fiction can be a good device for exposing this common and very painful occurrence.

Author Bio

Anne Taylor Fleming is a nationally recognized journalist and *CNN NewsNight* contributor. She is a regular on-camera essayist for the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* and the author of **Motherhood Deferred: A Woman's Journey**. Her work

has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, *Vogue*, and *Redbook*. She has been a radio commentator for CBS and a TV commentator for NBC. This is her first work of fiction. Fleming lives in Los Angeles with her husband, journalist Karl Fleming.

Critical Praise

"Fleming clearly has a knack for making the ups and downs of marital life deliciously entertaining."

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