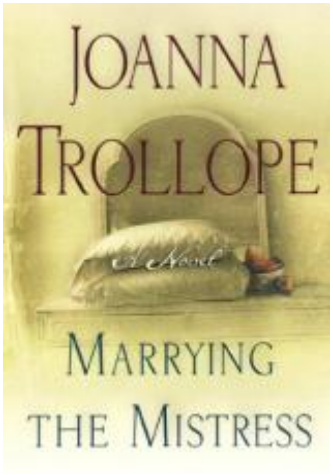
Marrying the Mistress

by Joanna Trollope



About the Book

It is not an unusual story: A married man falls in love with another woman. He decides to end his marriage and start a new life with his mistress. This decision sends shock waves throughout his family, disrupting not only his life, but the lives of his children, their respective partners, and their children. What is unusual, perhaps, is the sensitive way Joanna Trollope's provocative novel examines the repercussions of such an affair on family members. Her portrait of the Stockdale family-its married and unmarried couples, the parents and their children, grandparents and grandchildren, sisters and brothers-reveals the wonderful and sometimes terrible ways people respond to one another in a crisis of the heart. Before Guy and Merrion take the tumultuous step to be together, the Stockdale family resembles many middle- and upper-class families. A prominent judge with two grown sons, Guy is neither demonstrative nor neglectful as a husband and father. His wife, Laura, has dedicated herself to raising her children and making a comfortable home. Birthdays and anniversaries are remembered, gardens are tended, work gets done-and problems are tactfully swept under the rug. But some problems simply won't stay put. And as Guy's passion for Merrion grows, he realizes how unhappy he is in his marriage to Laura. This realization, and the steps he takes to address it, create a chain reaction of self-examination that exposes the considerable fault lines beneath the surface of nearly every relationship in the Stockdale family. And they are relationships worth examining, not least because Trollope's characters are so richly drawn that their stories feel both unique and universal. By blending moments of intense emotion with intricately wrought scenes of domestic life, Trollope skillfully conveys the euphoria of new love through the eyes of both a sixty-year-old man and a sixteen-year old boy. She walks readers through the desolation of a not-quite-elderly-and certainly not grown-up-woman's broken heart as well as the haphazard and fragile days of a self-conscious adolescent girl. And somewhere in between we come to know Simon and Merrion, tentatively straddling the path between youth and middle age, painfully coming to terms with the doubts that arise when you realize that you're not going to have everything you want in life, and trying to figure out what is worth sacrificing and what is necessary for happiness. An acute and observant chronicler of modern life, Trollope raises important questions about family and marriage, loyalty and responsibility. Should we root for Guy, who seems to have found happiness in a bright, energetic and lovely woman who happens to be younger than his own children? Should we sympathize with Laura who, though clearly demanding, self-involved, and possibly

unlovable, is nonetheless forced to rebuild her life at a less than tender age? To whom does Simon owe his loyalty: his mother, who has always depended on him and now seems to need him more than ever; or his wife Carrie, whose own capable nature has made her both indispensable and invisible? And what about Merrion? Should the Stockdale children welcome her for the joy she brings to Guy's life? Or treat her like an interloper, for the havoc she has brought to theirs? There are no easy answers, nor should there be. We may not agree with these characters' choices or actions, but we can empathize with the complexity of their predicaments because real life is messy-it doesn't matter if a home is as beautifully appointed as Laura's, with its country garden and embroidered cushions, or as cluttered and unkempt as Carrie's, with its dish-strewn kitchen and creaky pipes. The messiness comes from caring for other people-whether or not the object of that devotion is socially acceptable; whether or not the object of that devotion wants to be desired. The shock waves that emanate from Guy and Merrion's relationship tempt us to carry the earthquake analogy one step further: After the tremors have subsided, leaving those buildings with strong foundations still standing while weaker ones have crumbled, it is time to assess the damage; to demolish what can't be saved and reinforce what remains. It is an opportunity to rebuild for the future, and to be stronger than ever.

Discussion Guide

1. As Trollope portrays the dissolution of a marriage, she also explores the effects of that dissolution on the members of the families it affects. Discuss some of these effects, as well as the ways Guy and Merrion's respective family members cope with their relationship.

2. Three of Trollope's characters are mothers, yet each woman is markedly different. Discuss and compare Laura, Carrie, and Gwen's mothering styles. How has each, for better or worse, helped shape the lives and personalities of their children?

3. What do you think of Trollope's treatment of Laura? Do you think she is fairly drawn as a character? How do your feelings for her change over the course of the novel?

4. Compare the marriages of Guy and Laura, Simon and Carrie. What role does age and socio-economic background play in these relationships?

5. Likewise, compare the roles of the children of these marriages. How are Jack, Emma, and Rachel's relationships to their parents different from that of Simon and Alan?

6. Discuss Guy and Merrion's relationship. Do you think they were right in their decision not to get married? Does it anger you that their affair, which caused such turmoil in their families' lives, never ends in marriage? How large a role did the forbidden element of adultery play in their relationship? Was theirs a true love tragically thwarted by the constraints of society, or did they merely fill a void in each other's life?

7. Guy and Merrion's relationship begins to change after Jack seeks out his grandfather's help with his own romantic problems. Why is this such a pivotal event? What impact does Jack and Guy's new closeness have on Merrion?

8. Although the Stockdale family is not large, it extends through three generations, and nearly a dozen people. By contrast, Merrion's family is small-just her and her mother. How does having a family help, and hinder, Guy?

9. Of all the many different kinds of family relationships portrayed in the novel, discuss which, if any, you identify with-and why.

10. How do you think Trollope chose the title of this novel? What sorts of images does the word "mistress" invoke? Does Merrion seem to you like a typical mistress? Why or why not? What sort of comment do you think Trollope might be making about infidelity and marriage?

11. Imagine that Marrying the Mistress was made the basis for a debate about family values. How would that debate play out? What arguments does the novel provoke? Do you think it supports the idea of family values, or calls it into question?

Author Bio

Joanna Trollope was the author of many highly acclaimed novels, including THE CHOIR, THE BEST OF FRIENDS, NEXT OF KIN, MARRYING THE MISTRESS, GIRL FROM THE SOUTH and FRIDAY NIGHTS. Her novel OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN was made into a major drama serial for the BBC. She was the author of BRITANNIA'S DAUGHTERS, a study of women in the British Empire, and wrote several romantic historical novels under the name of Caroline Harvey. Joanna was appointed OBE in the 1996 Queen?s Birthday Honours List for services to literature. She passed away on December 11, 2025 at the age of 82.

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