



Husband and Wife

By Leah Stewart
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Introduction

In this new novel by the celebrated author of *The Myth of You and Me*, a young mother discovers that her husband's novel about infidelity may be drawn from real life.

Sarah Price is thirty-five years old. She doesn't feel as though she's getting older, but there are some noticeable changes: a hangover after two beers, the stray gray hair, and, most of all, she's called "Mom" by two small children. Always responsible, Sarah traded her MFA for a steady job, which allows her husband, Nathan, to write fiction. But Sarah is happy and she believes Nathan is too, until a truth is revealed: Nathan's upcoming novel, *Infidelity*, is based in fact.

Suddenly Sarah's world is turned upside down. Adding to her confusion, Nathan abdicates responsibility for the fate of their relationship and of his novel's publication—a financial lifesaver they have been depending upon—leaving both in Sarah's hands. Reeling from his betrayal, she is plagued by dark questions. How well does she really know Nathan? And, more important, how well does she know herself?

For answers, Sarah looks back to her artistic twenty-something self to try to understand what happened to her dreams. When did it all seem to change? Pushed from her complacent plateau, Sarah begins to act for the first time not so responsibly on all the things she has let go of for so long: her blank computer screen; her best friend, Helen; the volumes of Proust on her bookshelf. And then there is that e-mail in her inbox: a note from Rajiv, a beautiful man from her past who once tempted her to stray. The struggle to find which version of herself is the essential one—artist, wife, or mother—takes Sarah hundreds of miles away from her marriage on a surprising journey.

Wise, funny, and sharply drawn, Leah Stewart's *Husband and Wife* probes our deepest relationships, the promises we make and break, and the consequences they hold for our lives, revealing that it's never too late to step back and start over.

Questions for Discussion

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 fifty-three 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?

About the Author

Leah Stewart is the author of the novels *The Myth of You and Me* and *Body of a Girl*. A recipient of a 2010 NEA Literature Fellowship, she has taught at Vanderbilt University; Sewanee, the University of the South; and Murray State University, where she was the Watkins Endowed Professor of Creative Writing. She currently teaches creative writing at the University of Cincinnati and lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, with her husband and their two young children.