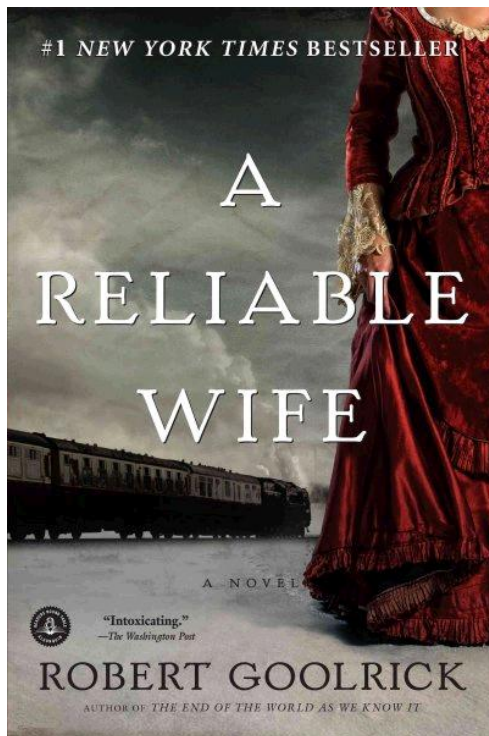


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1395677>

About the Book



Set in a small Wisconsin farming and manufacturing town still crumbling a decade after the depression of the 1890s, *A Reliable Wife* tells the story of Ralph Truitt, a wealthy businessman who advertises for “a reliable wife” in newspapers across America. The woman he chooses, Catherine Land, describes herself as “a simple, honest woman,” but in truth she is both complex and devious—not the missionary’s daughter she claims to be in her letter to Truitt but a courtesan of great beauty, kept by men and haunted by a terrible past. Catherine’s plan in accepting the marriage offer is simple: she will win this man’s devotion, and then, ever so slowly, she will poison him and leave Wisconsin a wealthy widow. What she has not counted on, though, is the passion she finds in this seemingly solid, forthright man—a man who also harbours secrets and whose own past is far from pure.

About the Author



Robert Goolrick is the author of the highly acclaimed memoir *The End of the World as We Know It*. He lives in New York City.

Reviews

Booklist

Goolrick twists a familiar story, refashioning it into something completely original. Many authors have employed the timeworn rural-man-advertises-for-mail-order-bride plot device, but few have permeated their narratives with gothic elements and suspense to such great effect. All is not as straightforward as it seems when Catherine Land steps off the train in rural Wisconsin in 1907. Who is Catherine, and what is her true intent? What shadowy secrets could middle-aged Ralph Truitt be hiding? Both these complex characters have plenty of traumatic baggage that is peeled away layer by layer as the two engage in a darkly dangerous game of check and checkmate. The unforeseen conclusion provides a big payoff for readers of this tension-laden debut from a promising new talent.

BookPage

Love has icy grip in compelling debut

In 1907, in a small Wisconsin town that bears his name, Ralph Truitt, the wealthy owner of an iron foundry, waits on the cusp of a looming blizzard for the train carrying Catherine Land, his mail-order bride from Chicago. From their first encounter, these desperate characters are plunged into a maelstrom of conflict that propels Robert Goolrick's fierce and sophisticated debut novel, *A Reliable Wife*, forward at breakneck speed.

Overcoming his sense of betrayal when he realizes Catherine has used the photograph of another to win her way into his life, Ralph reconciles himself to marrying her anyway, and his feelings for the woman some 20 years his

junior slowly deepen. Shortly after they wed, he dispatches her to St. Louis on a mission to entice his son Antonio, the product of his first marriage to a faithless Italian bride, to return home. When Catherine arrives there, the roots of her plan to murder Ralph are revealed, and as she confronts the enormity of the evil in whose service she's been enlisted she's torn between the seeming inevitability of her deadly plan and a growing sympathy for her husband's plight.

The harshness of the bleak Wisconsin landscape Goolrick so effectively evokes mirrors the psychological torment of his deeply flawed, but utterly human, characters. "The winters were long," he writes, "and tragedy and madness rose in the pristine air." When the scene shifts to St. Louis, Goolrick demonstrates equal skill at painting the garish colors of the urban underworld from which Catherine has emerged, an environment that has shaped the character she fights to overcome.

In its best moments, *A Reliable Wife* calls to mind the chilling tales of Poe and Stephen King, and at its core this is a tragedy of Shakespearean dimensions. It melds a plot drenched in suspense with expertly realized characters and psychological realism. The fate of those characters is in doubt right up to this relentless story's intense final pages, and Goolrick's ability to sustain that tension is a tribute to his craftsmanship and one of the true pleasures of a fine first novel.

Kirkus Review

A woman with her own agenda is caught between two men obsessed with the past. After breaking through with a disquieting memoir about his Southern childhood, Goolrick (*The End of the World as We Know It*, 2007) applies his storytelling talents to a debut novel, set in 1907, about icy duplicity and heated vengeance. The autumn of Ralph Truitt's life finds the 54-year-old businessman waiting on a train platform in rural Wisconsin for Catherine Land, the plain woman who answered his advertisement, which read: "Country businessman seeks reliable wife. Compelled by practical, not romantic reasons." But the beauty who arrives is not the woman whose photograph Truitt obsessed over, and she's conspiring against him. "What she wanted, of course, was a quick marriage to Ralph Truitt, followed by his painless demise," Goolrick writes. "What she wanted was both love and money, and she was not to have either except through Ralph, except, in fact, after Ralph." Carefully, the author unveils the secrets between husband and wife. Truitt confesses his losses, which include his daughter, who died, his first wife, who had an affair, and his runaway son, who fled

the violence suffered under his father's hand. The enigmatic Catherine does her best to hide her bleak history as a courtesan, undertaken to protect her sister, Alice, whom she still seeks.

Surprisingly, there's more to Truitt than the bottomless lust and rage that threatens to consume him, as the faithless Catherine discovers when he dispatches her to St. Louis to find his long-lost son, who is playing piano under the name Tony Moretti, a name she knows all too well. Back in Wisconsin, the three parties converge and are pushed toward an unpredictable yet inevitable endgame. A sublime murder ballad that doesn't turn out at all the way one might expect.

Publishers Weekly

Set in 1907 Wisconsin, Goolrick's fiction debut (after a memoir, *The End of the World as We Know It*) gets off to a slow, stylized start, but eventually generates some real suspense. When Catherine Land, who's survived a traumatic early life by using her wits and sexuality as weapons, happens on a newspaper ad from a well-to-do businessman in need of a "reliable wife," she invents a plan to benefit from his riches and his need. Her new husband, Ralph Truitt, discovers she's deceived him the moment she arrives in his remote hometown. Driven by a complex mix of emotions and simple animal attraction, he marries her anyway. After the wedding, Catherine helps Ralph search for his estranged son and, despite growing misgivings, begins to poison him with small doses of arsenic. Ralph sickens but doesn't die, and their story unfolds in ways neither they nor the reader expect. This darkly nuanced psychological tale builds to a strong and satisfying close.

Discussion Questions Source: <http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

1. The novel's setting and strong sense of place seem to echo its mood and themes. What role does the wintry Wisconsin landscape play? And the very different, opulent setting of St. Louis?
2. Ralph's and Catherine's story frequently pauses to give brief, frequently horrific glimpses into the lives of others. Ralph remarks on the violence that surrounds them in Wisconsin, saying, "They hate their lives. They start to hate each other. They lose their minds, wanting things they can't have." How do these vignettes of madness and violence contribute to the novel's themes?

3. Catherine imagines herself as an actress playing a series of roles, the one of Ralph's wife being the starring role of a lifetime. Where in the novel might you see a glimpse of the real Catherine Land? Do you feel like you ever get to know this woman, or is she always hidden behind a façade?
4. The encounter between Catherine and her sister Alice is one of the pivotal moments of the novel. How do you view these two women after reading the story of their origins? Why do the two sisters wind up on such different paths? Why does Catherine ultimately lose hope in Alice's redemption?
5. The idea of escape runs throughout the novel. Ralph thinks, "Some things you escape... You don't escape the things, mostly bad, that just happen to you." What circumstances trap characters permanently? How do characters attempt to escape their circumstances? When, if ever, do they succeed? How does the bird imagery that runs through the book relate to the idea of imprisonment and escape?
6. "You can live with hopelessness for only so long before you are, in fact, hopeless," reflects Ralph. Which characters here are truly hopeless. Alice? Antonio? Ralph himself? Do you see any glimmers of hope in the story?
7. Why, in your opinion, does Ralph allow himself to be gradually poisoned, even after he's aware of what's happening to him? What does this decision say about his character?
8. Why does Catherine become obsessed with nurturing and reviving the "secret garden" of Ralph's mansion? What insights does this preoccupation reveal about Catherine's character?
9. Does Catherine live up in any way to the advertisement Ralph places in the newspaper (p. 20)? Why or why not?
10. Did you have sympathy for any of the characters? Did this change as time went on?

11. At the onset of *A Reliable Wife* the characters are not good people. They have done bad things and have lived thoughtlessly. In the end how do they find hope?
12. The author directly or indirectly references several classic novels --- by the Brontë sisters, Daphne DuMaurier and Frances Hodgson Burnett, among others. How does *A Reliable Wife* play with the conventions of these classic Gothic novels? Does the book seem more shocking or provocative as a result?

Multimedia

'Reliable Wife': Madness And Passion In Wisconsin (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103502333>

A discussion of the novel on NPR's *Weekend Edition*.

Robert Goolrick at Fountain Bookstore (Video Clip)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaVo_3JOJ_Q

A 2010 appearance by the author.

Look forward to the upcoming film based on this novel, as production has recently begun: <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/458553/The-Reliable-Wife/overview>

Further Reading

The End of the World as We Know It: Scenes from a Life by Robert Goolrick

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1284666>

(Call number: 921 Goolrick)

It was the 1950s, a time of calm, a time when all things were new and everything seemed possible. A few years before, a noble war had been won, and now life had returned to normal. For one little boy, however, life had become anything but "normal." To all appearances, he and his family lived an almost idyllic life. The father was a respected professor, the mother a witty and elegant lady, someone everyone loved. They were parents to three bright, smiling children: two boys and a girl. They lived on a sunny street in a small college town nestled neatly in a leafy valley. They gave parties, hosted picnics, went to church-just like their neighbors. To all appearances, their life seemed ideal. But it was, in fact, all appearances.

Lineage, tradition, making the right impression-these were matters of great importance, especially to the mother. But behind the facade this family had created lurked secrets so dark, so painful for this one little boy, that his life would never be the same. It is through the eyes of that boy-a grown man now, revisiting that time-that we see this seemingly serene world and watch as it slowly comes completely and irrevocably undone. Beautifully written, often humorous, sometimes sweet, ultimately shocking, this is a son's story of looking back with both love and anger at the parents who gave him life and then robbed him of it, who created his world and then destroyed it.

Wisconsin: a bicentennial history by Richard Current

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1019101>

(Call number: 977.5 Cu)

A haven for summer tourists and winter sport enthusiasts, Wisconsin is famed for its physical beauty and its prodigious production of cheese and dairy products. Richard Nelson Current's compact history reveals the colorful past of America's Dairyland, from early explorers and gangsters to sports heroes and cheeseheads.

Wisconsin Chippewa myths & tales and their relation to Chippewa life

by Victor Barnouw

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1008741>

(Call number: 398.2 Ba)

Reprint of the work originally published in 1977 by the U. of Wisconsin Press.

Author's official website

<http://robertgoolrick.com/>

Information, news, and resources from the author.

Read-Alikes

The Fig Eater by Jody Shields

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1165264>

(Call number: Fiction Shields)

It's Vienna, 1910 and it is hot, unusually hot for the end of August. Someone has murdered a young woman. They find no objects, no obvious clues around her. They'll search the area again tomorrow during the day, when there is better light.

The Meaning of Night: A Confession by Michael Cox

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1271160>

(Call number: Fiction Cox)

Convinced that he is destined for great wealth, power, and influence, Edward Glyver will do anything to reclaim a prize that is rightfully his, including a showdown with his rival, poet-criminal Phoebus Rainsford Daunt.

Charles Jessold, Considered as a Murderer by Wesley Stace

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1379107>

(Call number: Fiction Stace)

A music critic named Leslie Sheppard tells the gripping story of composer Charles Jessold, who, after co-writing an opera with Sheppard, went on to murder his wife and her lover and then commit suicide, in a haunting sequence of events that mirrors the opera.

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter by Tom Franklin

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1372696>

(Call number: Fiction Franklin)

Silas and Larry are longtime friends who grew up together on the same Mississippi land. In childhood, the two had to keep their friendship hidden due to segregation laws, but that didn't stop the boys from forging a strong bond. When they were teens, Larry was named as a person of interest after a girl he was dating disappeared. Though nothing came of the accusations, Larry's reputation has remained tarnished. Now, 25 years later, Silas is the only police officer in town, and Larry once again is a suspect in another missing person's case. Is this just bad luck--or does Larry have something to hide? It's up to his old friend Silas to uncover the truth.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extras!

For a topic of discussion, describe events or time periods where people in the group found themselves in an isolated area and/or situation and how this affected them.

