



Mrs. Kimble

By Jennifer Haigh
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Introduction

Deftly exploring the poignant landscape of longing, *Mrs. Kimble* traces the lives of three women who marry the same opportunistic man, a chameleon named Ken Kimble. He seduces each of them with sensitivity and generosity, and with his obsessively perfected physique. But marriage reveals Ken's true persona--elusive, workaholic, and hungry for extramarital affairs. All three of his wives are sustained by the hope that he will once again become the hero they fell in love with. For Ken's children, the reality of their father's absence is at once devastating and indelible. And for Ken himself, the price of maintaining illusions appears to be negligible.

Spanning four decades in the life of a tantalizingly unknowable man, *Mrs. Kimble* vividly portrays the pain of unequal affections. In a voice that is neither maudlin nor sentimental, Jennifer Haigh has crafted a debut novel that captures journeys of the heart in a wholly original way. We hope that the

following questions will enhance your discussion of this provocative triumph in fiction.

Discussion Topics

1. Consider the similarities and differences among Birdie, Joan, and Dinah. Is there a common thread that attracts Ken to each of them?
2. Joan and Dinah have physical traits that cause them to feel self-conscious and prone to rejection. Do you consider Birdie's vulnerabilities to be equally physical in nature, or are they purely emotional?
3. What motivates Ken? In your opinion, what enables him to so suddenly shift from being charming to vapid? To what do you attribute his compulsive dishonesty?
4. The novel's title reflects the tradition of taking a husband's surname after marriage. All of Ken's wives change their last names and become Mrs. Kimble. What does this indicate about the tradition, gender, power, and identity in Ken's marriages?
5. Birdie appears in all three parts of the novel. What were your initial impressions of her? Did your opinion of her shift as her life story unfolded?
6. American society experienced significant changes between the 1960s and the 1990s. Did this appear to affect Ken's various marriages, or was his behavior consistent across the mores of all decades?
7. How might Birdie's life have been different had her father not interfered with her attraction to Curtis Mabry? What is the effect of the Mabry family's presence in the novel?
8. Though the novel's characters are for the most part indifferent to spirituality, religion provides a frequent backdrop in *Mrs. Kimble*. What is the significance of Ken's Bible school past? How did you react when he convinced Joan of his Jewish heritage?
9. Do you believe that Ken's abandonment of Birdie was the sole cause of her emotional breakdown? How might her life have played out if he hadn't left her?
10. How does Ken's departure affect his children's attitude toward love? Do their relationships reflect or defy their parents' example?
11. Jennifer Haigh builds the storyline of *Mrs. Kimble* around brief scenes rather than lengthy, uninterrupted chapters. What is the effect of this technique?
12. Ken is not the only predatory man in the novel; Birdie is exploited by the mechanic she meets as a waitress, for example. Do the novel's characterizations of men and women match your own experience with the opposite sex?
13. With which of Ken's wives were you most able to relate? How would you have responded in each of their situations?
14. Though Ken is the most obviously secretive character in the novel, all of his wives possess a certain degree of secrecy and denial. Do you believe that it's possible to lead a completely honest life -- including self honesty?
15. Ken is an enigma, yet his character is drawn in rich detail. Discuss the significance of his vanity, his attraction to younger women, and his apparent inability to love or show genuine affection. What is the relevance of his conservative childhood, particularly the death of his brother?
16. Food is mentioned throughout the novel, including Charlie's perpetual hunger as a child; Birdie's botched attempts to buy groceries; Ken's aversion to seafood, which causes Joan to tailor her menus; and Dinah's Thanksgiving reunion and culinary expertise. Discuss some of your most meaningful memories regarding food.
17. What makes Ken's cause of death particularly ironic and fitting?

18. While there are clearly three Mrs. Kimbles, are there also three Mr. Kimbles? Does each wife represent a separate identity for Ken?

19. What variations on love (parental, romantic, erotic) are presented in *Mrs. Kimble*? Which characters appear to experience the most authentic forms of love?

20. The novel closes with Ken's children brought together by Dinah. Charlie embraces his role as Brendan's big brother and father figure. What do you predict for the family after Ken's death?

About the Author

Jennifer Haigh's short fiction has appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Idaho Review*, *Global City Review*, and elsewhere. She is a graduate of Dickinson College and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was awarded a 2002 James A. Michener Fellowship. Raised in small-town Pennsylvania, she now lives in Boston, Massachusetts.