

A RELIABLE WIFE



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT GOOLRICK





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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 and Catherine's story frequently pauses to give brief, often 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" (page 205). 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 that you ever get to know this woman, or is she always hidden behind a facade?
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” (pages 5–6). 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 (page 8). 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 (page 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 du Maurier, 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?

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The plotting of *A Reliable Wife* seems very deliberately crafted, as readers must constantly change their expectations of these characters and their actions. There is one surprise after another as the story unfolds. Did you think about the reader's experience as you were crafting your storytelling, or did you write the story as you saw it?

I wanted to give readers, first and foremost, a good solid story and a reading experience that is as sensual as it is cerebral. I thought about the story for years before I started writing, then started it several times and stopped, and finally just committed myself to writing down what I had already committed to memory, the story of three figures in a barren landscape. I thought a great deal about the myth of Phaedra, and her entanglements with Theseus and Hyppolitus. So I thought I knew pretty much the whole thing.

But you're always surprised. I was surprised at Ralph's reaction to the knowledge that he was being poisoned. I was surprised that the brief encounter with Alice in St. Louis became, for me, the emotional fulcrum of the book. And I was surprised by Catherine's passion for knowledge, for the comfort she takes in the reading rooms of public libraries.

The main characters are strong. One might even say that they are bold. Each has an agenda, a secret, and a plan. Did any of their characteristics change as you wrote them? Did any of them surprise you as you wrote them?

I think the only thing that matters in life is goodness. It is all we have to leave behind us when we go, all we will be remembered for. It is our soul's wallet. These characters are not good people. They have lived mistaken and cruel lives, done despicable things.

I wanted to see if they could be redeemed, if the tiny spark of hope in each of their hearts could be enough to redeem them from damaged childhoods and thoughtless adulthood. They are strong because they are damaged and have had to fight to survive.

I found some could be saved, but not all. Some find redemption and some are lost forever. And that broke my heart. I had hoped to save them all, but life doesn't work that way.

And, as I said before, each of them surprised me somewhere along the way, not with their tenacity, but with their vulnerabilities.

Was any character a favorite to write? Is there one you now miss?

I don't have a favorite character. Each of them is, in some important way, a part of me. Put them together, you have the story of my life, so in that way, the book is a self-portrait.

And, yes, I miss them. They are like my children, and I love them no matter what acts they commit. But, just like children, I'm glad they seem to have found a home in the minds of readers.

People always ask if writing a book is cathartic in some way. It's not. What is cathartic is seeing it on the shelves of a bookstore, or in the hands of an anonymous reader on the bus. Then you feel you've done the best you can for your characters, and it's time for them to lead lives separate from your own.

But, now that I think of it, if I had to make the awful choice of a favorite among them, I would choose Ralph, because he is so forlorn and

lonely in the opening scene, and his loneliness moved me tremendously. By the end, whatever he's gone through, and whatever compromises he has made, he isn't lonely anymore.

You've mentioned that Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* was one of the major inspirations for your novel. Can you talk a little about Lesy's book and its relationship to your own?

Michael Lesy's remarkable book is an examination of the lives of ordinary citizens of a small town in northern Wisconsin in 1896. It is a collection of photographs taken by the local photographer and brief newspaper accounts of the surprisingly erratic lives of the men and women who endured a hard life in a poor year in a bleak landscape.

Ralph and Catherine and Antonio are vivid, larger than life. I wanted to plant them very securely in the world, and the world they inhabit is the one depicted by Michael Lesy. It is a world in which no one is safe, in which the roof can always cave in when you least expect it.

I've always thought the lives of ordinary people are far more fascinating than the lives of the rich and powerful. An account of a man burying his father is more fascinating to me than a politician's description of lunch with Henry Kissinger. A snapshot taken at the beach on a summer's day is more memorable than any fine art photography. They show much more clearly the preciousness and grace of life.

Michael Lesy shows us how fragile life is, how hard it can be to get through the day without running off the rails.

The depictions of the Wisconsin winter are so evocative and vivid. In fact, it almost becomes a character. Have you been to Wisconsin in the winter, or did you draw your atmosphere from Lesy's book and your own imagination?

When I worked in advertising, one of my clients was Kohler, the people who make the bathroom fixtures. My client was a man named Herbert Kohler, and he lived in Kohler, Wisconsin. So I know the harsh winter

there well. Ralph Truitt, in the book, bears no resemblance to Mr. Kohler, about whose personal life I know nothing, but I was struck by the particular dilemma of living in a town that was named after you, and being an autocrat who employed practically everybody who was at all employable. So I drew on my own experience, and Michael Lesy put it into a historical context for me.

You have said that you wanted to write a book about goodness and redemption and that is what you feel you did with *A Reliable Wife*. Can you talk to us a bit about that?

A religious man would say there are two kinds of grace—grace that is deserved, earned, and grace that is undeserved, that simply comes unexpectedly out of nowhere. Ralph strives for grace, he works hard at it, and is willing to settle for less than perfection.

Catherine finds grace in an unexpected place at a late hour as the snow falls and her sister is dying. She has spent her life believing that she would be saved by a miracle and, like most of us, when the miracle comes, she doesn't recognize it right away. She doesn't deserve it, she doesn't even recognize it, but it comes in spite of her own worst characteristics.

For Antonio, it never comes. He gets to see little glimpses, but in the end he is destroyed. He is gifted and longs for the things they all want, the simplicities of love and the restoration of an undamaged childhood, but he doesn't get to have it.

Life isn't fair, and it can fill you with joy or break your heart, all because of choices we make, all because of the unforeseen consequences of actions we take without thinking.

Power—and the use and misuse of power—is a strong theme in the story. How did you try to balance each character's need for control to move the story forward?

Of course, the real power lies in the hands of the writer. If Tolstoy wants Anna Karenina to go under the train, under she goes.

As for the characters, they need control because they are damaged. They have no way to protect themselves, except through their own force of will. When you put three people with such a strong need to control under one roof, something powerful is going to happen. The characters are controlling because they are afraid, of loneliness and aging, of poverty, of lovelessness.

It's easy to despise them, for their frailty, their obsessions, their inability to let go of their hurt and their anger. I began with hope in my heart for each of them, and I hope readers will, too.

Sex and the manipulations of people through sex is a very strong driver of the story. Sex is power for these characters, and in many cases it is brutal and raw. Do you think that people can be driven by sexual acts to the point that they lose all rational thought?

The short answer is yes. *Therese Raquin* is one of the best explorations of the subject, of its power to engulf and ultimately destroy. But, in the end, I don't think it's sex that drives these characters, it's a longing for love, a love each of them has glimpsed briefly and then lost, they think forever. I think that Ralph and Catherine find, by the end, that sexual obsession is both addictive and toxic, and discover, to their wonder, that affection and love and trust and parenthood are what can fill the vast hollow of their hearts. And, in that discovery, they rediscover their own humanity, their ability to trust, to give, to give in.

A childhood book of your sister's was an influence on the end of the novel. May we ask you to share that story?

My sister had a book called *The Park That Spring Forgot*, published in the 1940s, a little girl's picture book. You can still find it on the Internet. In it, there is a city park to which spring doesn't return one year, that remains locked in the icy grip of winter. In the story, a little girl goes in search of Spring, who turns out to be a tall, willowy woman, and persuades her to come back to the park. As she walks through the space,

everywhere she sets her foot turns green and verdant, the flowers bloom and the birds come home to sing their summer song. I never forgot it. *A Reliable Wife* had, as its genesis, that exact scene, and it happens for Catherine right at the end, just when she thinks everything is lost.

I've always loved the novels of Jane Austen because of the knack she had for making the happiness come all at once, just at the end, like a magic trick. Reread *Persuasion* and just marvel at how good it can make you feel, as a reader.

You've now published a novel and a memoir, *The End of the World as We Know It: Scenes from a Life*. Did you find the writing process fundamentally different for these two genres? We know the memoir was published first. Which was completed first?

I wrote the novel first, and saw that it had to do with a set of themes that are deeply embedded in my own history. So, almost as an afterthought, I figured that if I was going to try to create a truthful fiction that was, as I said, in so many ways a self-portrait, I should go on and create a truthful history of my own life. Writing a novel is exciting and operatic; writing a memoir is like writing a long, honest letter to a trusted friend. *The End of the World as We Know It* is probably the best reader's guide to the novel. If you want to know why Ralph, Catherine, and Antonio behave as they do, the answer is simple: it's because they are the sum and statement of the history of my life.

As you have been on the road, what have you been hearing from readers about *A Reliable Wife*?

The most interesting question came from a young man in his thirties who asked me to discuss the relationship between love and aging. We think when we're young that, as we get older, our passions and enthusiasms will fade, will lose their hold on us, and we will enter into some more gentle phase. I don't find it to be true. Our passions, in fact, in-

tensify, like a sauce that has been reduced to its essence by long slow simmering over a low flame.

What are you working on now?

I am working on a new novel based on a true story I heard thirty years ago when I was living in a tiny town on a remote island in Greece. It was a story about the only crime that had ever happened in the town, and, yes, it was a crime of passion, and it, like *A Reliable Wife*, involves three characters—a man, a woman, and a little boy. It is called *Harbor of Love*.

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ROBERT GOOLRICK is the author of the critically acclaimed memoir *The End of the World as We Know It*. This is his first novel. He lives in New York City.

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