

Marriage in Literature: Late 20th-Century Portrayals

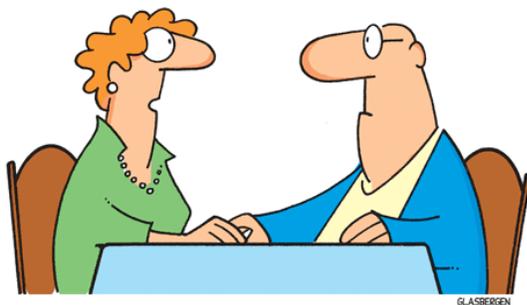
(Wednesdays, 10-12 a.m., Amherst Women's Club)

A well-established cliché in literature is the happily-ever-after marriage. However, the realists among us know that marriage is thornier and far more complicated than sentimental conclusions imply. In this seminar we will explore seven portrayals of 20th-century marriage by leading writers whose views of “connubial bliss” are probing and interesting. We anticipate lively discussions of the issues they raise. *(For the list of works we will all read, see over.)*



Our Procedures: As in past seminars (on the family, science, illness), we will devote an entire session to each work, approaching it twice: once for its literary qualities and once for its portrayal of marriage. We will begin the semester with two introductory sessions. In the first session, moderators will provide guidance on ways to lead our literary discussions, and we each will introduce ourselves as readers; in the second session, moderators will provide guidance on ways to lead our marriage discussions, and we will each describe our lifetime observations of modern marriage. A final session will be devoted to the group's comparisons of all the works we've read and discussed.

Dealing with Marriage: Our explorations of the pleasures and problems of marriage will focus on the sorts of questions that counselors and social workers ask: e.g., What



"I'm willing to accept you for who you are if I ever figure out who you are."

brought the couple together, and what binds them now? What, if anything, drives them to seek escape from the marriage? How do their personalities match up? Who's dominant? What are the major stressors of the relationship? What elements of a good marriage are present? In introducing ourselves in relation to marriage, we will describe our personal observations of changes in marriage

through our own lifetimes (which corresponds to the period covered in our readings).

Dealing with Literature: In exploring the literary qualities of the works, we will focus on authors' choices of such qualities as tone, narrative style, or plot, on uses of point of view, setting, or metaphor, or on any other elements of the work that shape our responses as readers. In introducing ourselves as readers, we will describe, for example, our changing tastes over time, our reading habits, our reading experiences as students, or the ways reading has affected other parts of our lives.

The Books: All are available in paperback, many are also available electronically and through local libraries. In alphabetical order by authors' names, they are:

Gail Godwin, *The Good Husband* (1994). Four people, two marriages, a dying charismatic female academic, and a welter of role confusions and reversals.

Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior* (2012). The flight of monarch butterflies mirrors a young farmwife's desire to escape.

Alison Lurie, *The War Between the Tates* (1974). Academic revolt, professors, hippies, infidelity, friendship, and obnoxious teenagers.

Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety* (1987). An all-time favorite of many readers; two couples who are life-long friends struggle with one wife's choices about her own death.

Anne Tyler, *Breathing Lessons* (1988). A couple on a road trip to a funeral take detours that reveal their complicated and touching past.

John Updike, *Too Far to Go: The Maples Stories* (1956-1979). Through seventeen short stories written about one couple, we watch a marriage define itself and then collapse.

August Wilson, *Fences* (1986). A late-1930s portrayal of a black marriage strained by tensions between the past, the present, and the future (a play).

Any questions? Call or email the moderators:

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