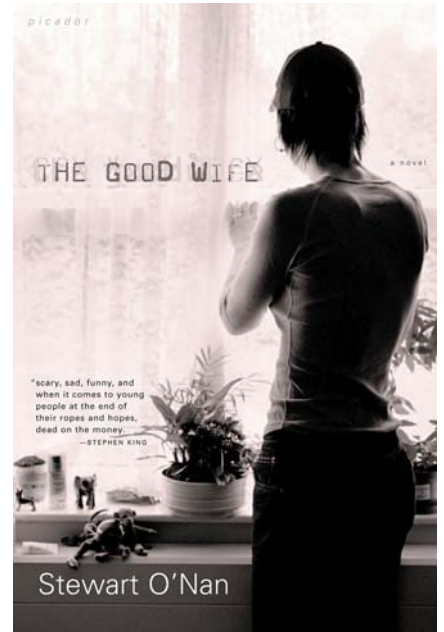


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Good Wife A Novel

by Stewart O’Nan

ISBN: 0-312-42501-5



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Good Wife* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Good Wife*.

About the Book

On a clear winter night in upstate New York, two young men break into a house they believe is empty. It isn't, and within minutes an old woman is dead and the house is in flames. Soon after, the men are caught by the police. Across the county, a phone rings in a darkened bedroom, waking a pregnant woman. It's her husband. He wants her to know that he and his friend have gotten themselves into a little trouble. So Patty Dickerson's old life ends and a strange new one begins.

At once a love story and a portrait of a woman discovering her own strength, *The Good Wife* follows Patty through the twenty-eight years of her husband's incarceration, as she raises her son, navigates a system that has no place for her, and braves the scorn of her community. Compassionate and unflinching, *The Good Wife* illuminates a marriage and a family tested to the limits of endurance.

Praise for the Book

“One of the most authentic contemporary political novels I’ve read by an American writer . . . [O’Nan] creates a mood so intense that, as long as the novel lasts, the reader can’t escape it.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“*The Good Wife* is powerful, unforgettable. . . . O’Nan knows what Evan S. Connell knew . . . that an unassuming woman might be surprisingly complicated. . . . Patty Dickerson is a wonderful character, and this novel is astonishing.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*

“A moving, lyrical, assured piece of work . . . This is a quiet novel, written in a nearly adjective-free, spare, strong style. . . . O’Nan is an experienced explorer of the irrationalities of being human.”

—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“O’Nan is a documentarian—one of our best—of people in desperate situations. . . . In bare prose he spins out the days of one woman who gets no breaks and beautifully builds suspense simply by asking: What does it take for a person to survive?”

—*People*

“A deceptively simple style, confessional almost. Indeed, the tone here is so personal, so intimate, we feel like voyeurs, as if we’re reading someone’s diary . . . it is in these quotidian moments that the novel reaches its lyrical height.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“O’Nan displays his astonishing ability to get under his diverse characters’ skin and thereby draw us deeply into their lives.”

—*Chicago Sun-Times*

“[O’Nan] depicts Patty’s working class-milieu with rare and clear-eyed compassion.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Wholly engrossing and flawlessly crafted . . . Masterful.”

—*Baltimore Sun*

About the Author

Stewart O’Nan’s novels include *The Night Country* and *A Prayer for the Dying*. He is also the author of the nonfiction books *The Circus Fire*, and, with Stephen King, the bestselling *Faithful*. *Granta* named him one of the Twenty Best Young American Novelists. He lives with his family in Connecticut.

Discussion Questions

1. Who narrates *The Good Wife*? Though the narration is in the third person, it is extraordinarily close to Patty, her family, and the details of the world they live in. Does O’Nan have a larger goal for the novel which is illuminated by this level of narrative intimacy?
2. Think about how Patty and Tommy are connected by death and grief, not simply in the killing of Mrs. Wagner, but by the fact that both Patty and Tommy have dealt with family tragedies. How does this earlier grief define their characters?
3. Discuss O’Nan’s use of observed details: How do people reveal themselves by minor actions and reactions? How many of these details are observed by Patty and what does her level of observation tell us about her?
4. Why do you think the author chooses pop music as a way to identify the time period , rather than political or economic events? Moreover, why do you think O’Nan chooses to set the early portion of the novel in the 1970s?
5. How does the author’s depiction of the legal process compare to other fictional re-creations of the court (whether in film, television, or other novels)?
6. By and large, *The Good Wife* is a character study of Patty—her life, her story. Does Patty feel authentic? Do her trials feel believable? How does O’Nan make you “know” her, and most importantly, care about her?
7. Additionally, what sort of attention is given to Patty’s family? Does the book give them the same amount of depth—of knowability, so to speak—as its heroine? How do you think your family would react to such circumstances?
8. How does the author make the many routines of Patty’s life continually interesting?
9. Who are the men in Patty’s life? How do their roles deepen our sense of Patty? Include Casey in this category.
10. Do you feel that the novel’s happy ending is dictated by character (meaning Patty and Tommy’s strength as people actually *creates* a happy ending) or by some sort of larger, narrative design?

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