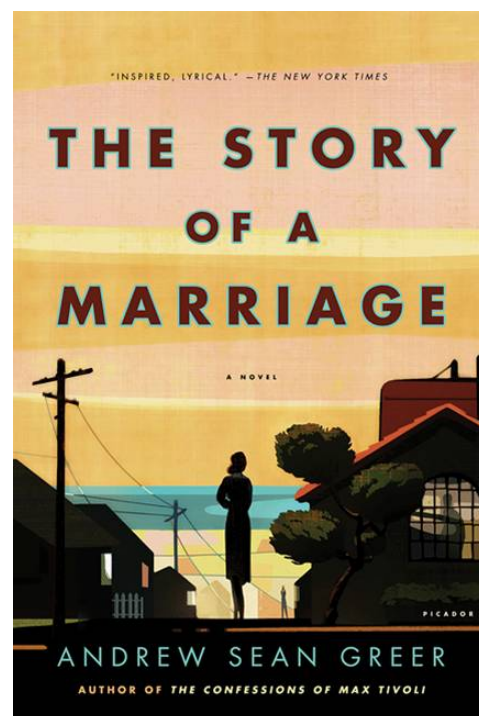


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Story of a Marriage A Novel

by Andrew Sean Greer

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Story of a Marriage* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. 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 Story of a Marriage*.

About the Book

From the bestselling author of *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*, a love story full of secrets and astonishments set in 1950s San Francisco.

“We think we know the ones we love.” So Pearlie Cook begins her indirect and devastating exploration of the mystery at the heart of every relationship, how we can ever truly know another person.

It is 1953 and Pearlie, a dutiful housewife, finds herself living in the Sunset district of San Francisco, caring not only for her husband’s fragile health but also for her son, who is afflicted

with polio. Then, one Saturday morning, a stranger appears on her doorstep and everything changes. All the certainties by which Pearlie has lived are thrown into doubt. Does she know her husband at all? And what does the stranger want in return for his offer of \$100,000? For six months in 1953, young Pearlie Cook struggles to understand the world around her, most especially her husband, Holland.

Pearlie's story is a meditation not only on love but also on the effects of war—with one war just over and another one in Korea coming to a close. Set in a climate of fear and repression—political, sexual, and racial—*The Story of a Marriage* portrays three people trapped by the confines of their era, and the desperate measures they are prepared to take to escape it. Lyrical and surprising, *The Story of a Marriage* looks back at a period that we tend to misremember as one of innocence and simplicity.

Like Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, Andrew Sean Greer's novel is a narrative tour de force that confirms him as "one of the most talented writers around" (Michael Chabon).

About the Author

Andrew Sean Greer is the bestselling author of *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* (FSG, 2004), the story collection *How It Was for Me*, and the novel *The Path of Minor Planets*. He lives in San Francisco, California.

Discussion Questions

1. How does your view of Pearlie and Holland change in the first course of reading Part I? What were your assumptions about them on a first reading and how did they alter?
2. What was your reaction to Buzz's arrival on Pearlie's doorstep? And to the speed with which he becomes such a regular guest in Pearlie and Holland's home?
3. How does Buzz and Pearlie's relationship develop and change in the course of the novel? Discuss what brings them together and separates them.
4. At one point in the novel, Pearlie says, "I am sure we each loved a different man. Because a lover exists only in fragments..." (p. 64). Do Pearlie and Buzz each know a different Holland? Does Holland surprise you by the choice he finally makes?
5. "It was a medieval time for mothers," Pearlie tells us (p.14). How much does Pearlie's role as a wife and a caregiver define her? Do you think she could have responded differently to Buzz and his revelations?
6. How did you think about or remember the fifties before reading this novel? Why is it so often portrayed as a period of innocence, despite the polio epidemic, the Korean War, the Red Scare, and segregation? Did the novel change the way you think about this period?

7. Pearlie tells us that she was a “finker for Mr. Pinker” (p. 120). What effect does that have on your view of her and your trust in her as a narrator?
8. “This is a war story. It was not meant to be. It started as a love story, the story of a marriage, but the war has stuck to it everywhere like shattered glass. Not an ordinary story of men in battle but of those who did not go to war” (p. 156). Discuss the way the war affects Pearlie, Holland, Buzz, Annabel Platt, and William Platt.
9. How do the lives of Ethel Rosenberg and Eslanda Goode Robeson relate to Pearlie?
10. Why do you think Pearlie goes to the International Settlement? Does her view of homosexuality change in the course of the novel, and if so, how?
11. How did what happened in Kentucky shape both Pearlie and Holland? And how are they affected by the social changes that happen in the course of their lives?
12. How does Sonny’s life differ from that of his parents?
13. “We think we know the ones we love...But what have we really understood?” (p.3). How do you think the novel answers that question?
14. Do you agree with Pearlie’s decision at the end of novel not to meet Buzz? Why does she prefer to walk out of the hotel and into the sunlight?

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