

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *The Meaning of Wife* *A Provocative Look at Women and Marriage in the Twenty-first Century*

*by Anne Kingston*

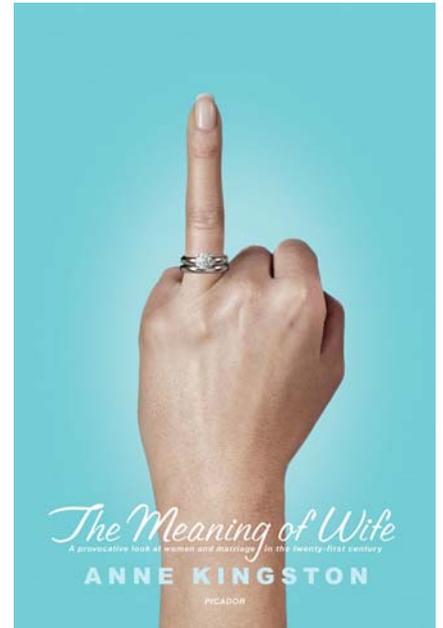
ISBN: 0-312-42500-7

### About this Guide

How do today's wives define themselves? How does society define them? How should we address the financial, sexual, and emotional conflicts experienced by a generation of women caught in a cultural sea change? Anne Kingston offers an eye-opening examination of wifhood and the history that has brought wives to an unprecedented series of turning points today. This guide is designed to enhance your reading and discussion of *The Meaning of Wife*. We hope the following topics will enrich your experience of this revealing tour.

### About the Book

Described by Carla Lucchetta in *The Vancouver Sun* as “one part *The Beauty Myth*. . . and one part *Backlash*,” Anne Kingston’s *The Meaning of Wife* takes an unflinching approach to life after marriage. Probing the wedding industry, exposing media hype, and culling candid perspectives on modern marriage, Kingston’s report brims with refreshing commentary and surprising trends.



Legislation during the twentieth century gave women access to birth control, better career opportunities, no-fault divorce, and a host of other seemingly liberating changes. Yet the “domestic goddess” has become a chic new icon, the corporate glass ceiling is far from shattered, wives are still saddled with a majority of parenting and housekeeping duties, and violence is still a fact of life for scores of women enduring abusive marriages. Examining the promise versus the reality of marriage, Kingston distills important new truths about being a wife in the twenty-first century.

“Provocative, smart.”

—*Elle*

“*The Meaning of Wife* styles itself in the tradition of *Backlash* and *The Beauty Myth*: It’s a pop-culture-literate survey of the last twenty-five years that serves up feminist ideas with a lively touch.”

—*The Village Voice*

“Kingston’s spirited romp across the kitchens and boardrooms, bedrooms, courtrooms and shopping malls of modern culture yields important . . . insights about wifehood in the twenty-first century.”

—*Chicago Tribune*

“Entertaining . . . Kingston’s quirky sensibility (shades of Caitlin Flanagan) and her clever readings of pop culture make this book stand out. . . . The analysis is delightful.”

—*Newsday*

## About the Author

Anne Kingston’s writing has appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, *Saturday Night*, *Toronto Life*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times Magazine*. She is a columnist for the *National Post*, where she writes on social and cultural issues.

## Discussion Questions

1. The book’s opening quotation, from the late scholar and novelist Carolyn Heilbrun, describes the power of storytelling and icons in defining a woman’s identity. From English royalty to Lorena Bobbitt, how has wifedom evolved over generations? What do your family’s narratives indicate about the women in your ancestry?
2. *The Meaning of Wife* provides extensive history regarding “coverture,” which allowed a woman’s identity to be legally subsumed by her husband’s upon marriage. Though such laws are rarely seen in the Western world today, do you believe that coverture continues to exist in less obvious ways?

3. Does the desire for a fairy-tale wedding contradict the desire to become a self-actualized, strong woman? Why have so many brides and their families succumbed to pricey materialism in contemporary weddings? How have your own ideas about “the perfect wedding” changed throughout your lifetime?
4. The “wife gap” is a catch-22 for wives who work outside the home. Who or what has perpetuated the mystique of traditional roles for women? Why does this mystique so often undermine a woman’s efforts to gain power in a domain other than a domestic one?
5. How do you define “sexual liberation”? To what do you attribute the lack of sexual spark in so many contemporary marriages? How do you explain the expectation of some men that their wives enter the marriage as virgins who can nonetheless perform like experienced dynamos?
6. What is your perception of abused women who inflict violence, lethal or otherwise, on their abusers, as described in the chapter titled “Love Hurts”? How would you have ruled during the trials of Hedda Nussbaum or Britain’s Sara Thornton? How do their stories differ from Nicole Brown’s, and the stories of others like her?
7. Discuss the rise of the “unwife.” Is financial liberation the primary reason for the census boom in single women, or are there less tangible reasons? Why do some segments of society feel threatened by successful single women?
8. To what do you attribute the judicial shifts that have given bigger divorce settlements to the ex-wives of high-paid executives? How do you think courts—and society—should go about measuring a wife’s worth?
9. The image of Princess Diana’s wedding day opens and closes *The Meaning of Wife*. What are your personal associations with that image? Will the twenty-first century uphold it as an ideal to emulate?
10. What do you make of the media icons referred to in the book, from Mary Tyler Moore to Martha Stewart and Bridget Jones? Do they prove that the media shape our aspirations? Or are the media simply mirroring society?
11. In chapter nine, “The Wife Axis,” the author highlights dilemmas in defining the current role of wife: while wives have been freed from many of their historical tethers, society still burdens them with numerous hollow duties, judging them harshly when fantastic expectations are not met. How long will this cycle remain? What prescription can you offer for healing the institution of wifehood?
12. What does the surge in bestsellers on how to “catch” a husband indicate about the mindset of contemporary bachelors? How would you characterize the current balance of power between single men and single women?

13. Did the cultural revolution of the 1960s affect your dating habits and expectations of marriage? Compared to your parents and grandparents, do you believe that you are more or less likely to find fulfillment in life?
14. From where did you learn how to define “wife”? Do any aspects of traditional wives appeal to you, or do you consider this concept to be fraught with myth? In your opinion, what is the ideal meaning of wife?
15. What future do you envision for new generations of women? Who will be their strongest agents for change?

For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:

Call: 646-307-5629

Fax: 212-253-9627

E-mail: [readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com](mailto:readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com)

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: [www.picadorusa.com](http://www.picadorusa.com)

Picador

What to Read Next<sup>®</sup>