

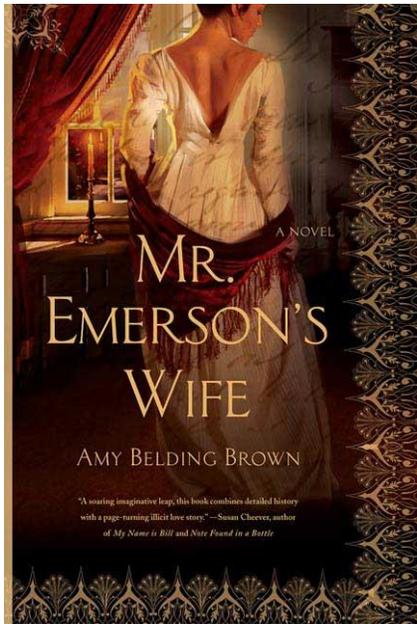
READING GROUP GUIDE

Mr. Emerson's Wife

By Amy Belding Brown

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Mr. Emerson's Wife* 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 *Mr. Emerson's Wife*.

About the Book

In this novel about Ralph Waldo Emerson's wife, Lidian, Amy Belding Brown examines the emotional landscape of love and marriage. Living in the shadow of one of the most famous men of her time, Lidian becomes deeply disappointed by marriage, but consigned to public silence by social conventions and concern for her family's reputation. Drawn to the erotic energy and intellect of close family friend Henry David Thoreau, she struggles to negotiate the confusing territory between love and friendship while maintaining her moral authority and inner strength. In the course of the book, she deals with overwhelming social demands, faces devastating personal loss, and discovers the deepest meaning of love. Lidian eventually encounters the truth of her own character and learns that even our faults can lead us to independence.

About the Author

Amy Belding Brown, a graduate of Bates College, received her master of fine arts degree from Vermont College. Her publication credits include *Yankee*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *American Way*, among others. The wife of a United Church of Christ minister and mother of four, she is on the staff of the Orchard House museum in Concord, Massachusetts.



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Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the fact that Lidian always addresses her husband as “Mr. Emerson?” When and why does she finally address him as “Waldo?”
2. In their first encounter, Lidian and Mr. Emerson discuss their views of marriage. Lidian asserts that a “marriage of opposites” is a good thing because it perfects an individual by balancing strengths and weaknesses. In what ways do you think Lidian and Mr. Emerson balance each other? Do you think Lidian’s marriage proved or disproved her theory?
3. The novel is in Lidian’s voice and filtered through her view of things. How do you think Lidian contributes, directly and indirectly, to the strains in her marriage? What was she looking for in her marriage? Was marriage itself important to Lidian – or only marriage to Emerson?
4. How did Lidian’s experiences with her parents shape her later outlook and decisions?
5. What role does guilt play in this novel? What actions does Lidian take that she regrets? What does she do to find forgiveness? Does she ever forgive herself for her imperfections? Does forgiveness in her life and her world have any meanings no longer relevant today?
6. In what ways does death overshadow the Emersons’ marriage? Is marriage a symbol of life or death in this novel?
7. How do the Emersons succeed in achieving their dream of making their home a gathering place for philosophers? In what ways do they fail? What does this dream cost them?
8. The “double” motif of the novel—two baptisms, two names, two loves—points to Lidian’s deep inner conflicts. How does her religious faith complicate those conflicts? How does it help her to resolve those conflicts?
9. In Chapter 20, Lidian reflects on how strange it is that “the love of another man was the very glue that bound me to my husband.” How did Lidian’s relationship with Henry bind her to Mr. Emerson?
10. What do Henry’s letters represent for Lidian, and how does her burning of them make her free?
11. Lidian lives in the shadow of Ellen Tucker throughout her married life. In the course of the book, she moves from jealousy to resigned acceptance of her husband’s undying love for his first wife. In chapter 28, after reading Ellen’s letters, Lidian states that she has “fallen in love” with Ellen. What does she mean by this? What in Lidian’s character makes this possible?



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12. What are some of the losses that Lidian suffers, both human and psychological? How do those losses impact her relationship with her husband? How does she try to recover from some of these losses, or doesn't she?

13. In what ways does Lidian retain her moral authority throughout the novel, in spite of her transgressions?

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