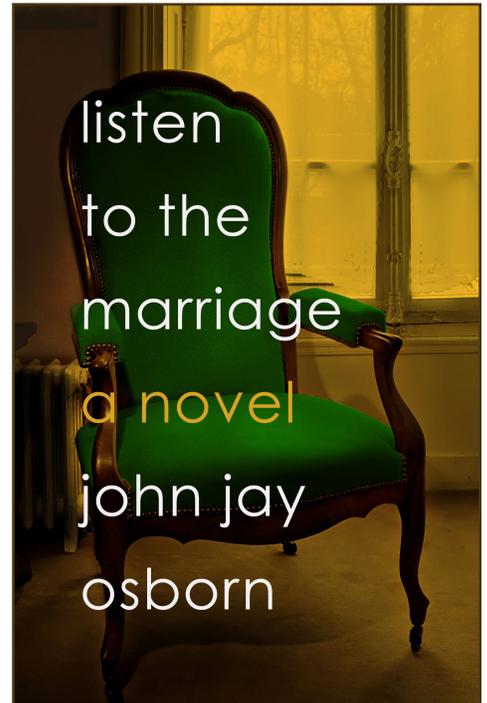


Reading Group Gold

Listen to the Marriage

A Novel

by **John Jay Osborn**



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Gretchen and Steve have been married for a long time. Living in San Francisco, recently separated, with two children and demanding jobs, they've started going to a marriage counselor. Unfolding over the course of ten months and taking place entirely in the marriage counselor's office, John Jay Osborn's *Listen to the Marriage* is the story of a fractured couple in a moment of crisis, and of the person who tries to get them to see each other again. A searing look at the obstacles we put in our own way, as well as the forces that drive us apart (and those that bring us together), *Listen to the Marriage* is a poignant exploration of marriage—heartbreaking and tender.

We hope the following questions will enhance your reading group's experience of this novel.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the problems in Steve and Gretchen's marriage that bring them into therapy? What has been going on in their lives—work, family, and so forth—that caused them to separate? Do they agree on what their problems are? Who is more at fault? Who is more upset? What are their goals at the beginning of therapy?
2. The narrative shifts between what Sandy, the marriage therapist, is thinking about Gretchen and Steve and what she actually says to them. What do her thoughts reveal about her opinion of the

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couple and their marriage? About how she approaches therapy? Which thoughts does she share, and which does she hold back?

3. Gretchen's interactions with Sandy are often confrontational. She challenges Sandy's counseling methods and accuses her of siding with Steve. Why does Gretchen behave like this? How does Sandy respond? At the end of the book, Sandy "realized what Gretchen wanted. A burst of love swept through her. What marriage counselor can remain impartial?" What has happened? Is Sandy's "burst of love" for Gretchen or the marriage?
4. As Steve and Gretchen are negotiating childcare so Gretchen can travel to New York with Bill, Sandy's thoughts drift to how little she cares about her clients' outside lives. "The important story was what happened inside her office. It was what she had to focus on, it was the *story*, it was what was really happening." What is Steve and Gretchen's story outside the office, and how do they each tell it differently in therapy? What is the story unfolding inside the office that Sandy wants them to focus on?
5. When Steve tells Gretchen he is thinking of taking the kids to visit the Snyders on their farm in Mendocino, Gretchen responds with anger. She says Tina Snyder is "an airhead trust-fund baby," and that their organic farm is "chaotic." But how does she really feel and why? Are there other instances when Gretchen says the opposite of what she means?
6. How do their extramarital relationships help Gretchen and Steve better understand each other and what they want from their marriage? What does Gretchen initially see in Bill that reminds her of what attracted her to Steve? What does Gretchen learn from being with Bill that helps her understand what she needs from Steve?
7. The story is set almost entirely in Sandy's office, with each chapter comprising a therapy session. In which sessions do Steve and Gretchen have breakthroughs? In which do they seem to be stuck or moving backward? For example, does the session that happens right after Gretchen's trip to New York seem like progress?
8. What kind of person is Gretchen, according to Steve? According to Sandy? How does Gretchen see herself? What are the rules she has made for herself?
9. What happens in the sessions that Sandy has alone with Steve and with Gretchen? What do they learn? How does Sandy use these sessions to inform her work with them when they meet together?
10. What do we know of Sandy's personal life? Is she married? Does her relationship with Heidi, her mother, influence her approach to Steve and Gretchen's therapy? Why are we given so much detail about what has happened between Sandy and Heidi?
11. Chapter 15 begins: "The next session, they were all over each other, as if they hadn't made any progress the session before. Sandy wasn't surprised." What progress did Gretchen and Steve

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make in the previous session? Why isn't Sandy surprised that the next session is both especially difficult and especially critical? What has happened by the end of the chapter?

12. Whom are you rooting for as the book progresses—Gretchen, Steve, or the marriage? Do Gretchen and Steve change or grow in ways that cause your sympathies to shift? Are Gretchen and Steve likable as individuals? As a couple? Do you think they belong together? Are they people you would like to know?
13. After Valentine's Day, Gretchen meets with Sandy alone. What has happened in the meantime to alter her feelings about both Bill and Steve? What is she beginning to understand about the differences between the two men as well as the differences between romantic love and marriage?
14. In the last chapter the couple is reunited. Why does Gretchen allow Steve to move in with her? What has changed about each of them that will give them a chance to have a better marriage? What do they commit to going forward?
15. It could be said that the book has four main characters: Sandy, Gretchen, Steve, and the marriage, represented by Sandy's green chair. Steve and Gretchen's task is to learn to listen to their marriage. When they are finally able to do that, they are able to reconcile. What is it that the marriage has to say to them?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Jay Osborn graduated from Harvard Law School in 1970. He wrote *The Paper Chase* while he was a full-time law student. Osborn has clerked for the United States Court of Appeals, practiced law in New York City, taught at the University of Miami School of Law, and practiced in the estate-planning field, as well as giving advice and representation to artists and writers. He is the author of several novels and has written episodes for a variety of television shows. Since 1991 he has been a professor at the law school of the University of San Francisco.

Guide written by Patricia Daneman