

The Second Last Woman in England

By Maggie Joel

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Genre and Subject

Murder— Great Britain

Families — Fiction

Historical fiction

Synopsis

Mrs Harriet Wallis is found guilty of the murder of her husband in London. It is 1953, the same year of Elizabeth's Coronation, and this woman is set to become the second-last woman in England to be hanged.

In early 1950s London, the Wallises are a well-to-do family and a model of rectitude. The glacial Harriet and her husband, Cecil, a big name in shipping, enact the rituals of family life with an exactitude that reflects the expectations of their class. Joel creates the veneer of moral austerity that typified the times then chips away at it, exposing the inconsistencies that belied an idealised family life.

Author Biography

Maggie Joel is a British-born writer currently living in Sydney. She has been writing fiction and non-fiction for over ten years and has had many short stories published including in *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Canberra Arts Review* and *Westerly*. She is the author of *The Past and Other Lies*.

Discussion Starters

- How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored?
- Describe the main characters—personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities. Why do characters do what they do? Are their actions justified? Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship). How has the past shaped their lives? Do you admire or disapprove of them?
- Discuss the plot: Is it engaging—do you find the story interesting? Were you surprised by complications, twists & turns? Did you find the plot predictable, even formulaic?

- Talk about the book's structure. Does the time-line move forward chronologically? Is there a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints? Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way she did?
- What main ideas—themes—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use symbols to reinforce the main ideas?
- What passages strike you as insightful, even profound? Perhaps a bit of dialog that's funny or poignant or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there's a particular comment that states the book's thematic concerns?
- Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?
- If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?
- Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

If you liked this book, you may also like...

- *The Shadows Sister: Star's story* by Lucinda Riley
- *This Was a Man* by Jeffrey Archer
- *Vanessa and her sister* by Priya Parmar

Author biography from Murdoch Books

Discussion starters adapted from Litlovers and the Publisher

Read-a-likes from City of Ryde Library staff