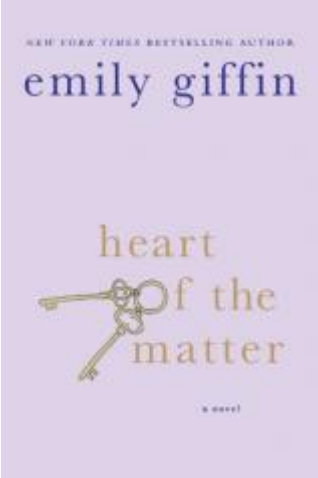
bookreporter

Heart of the Matter

by Emily Giffin



About the Book

Tessa Russo is the mother of two young children and the wife of a renowned pediatric surgeon. Despite her mother's warnings, Tessa has recently given up her career to focus on her family and the pursuit of domestic happiness. From the outside, she seems destined to live a charmed life.

Valerie Anderson is an attorney and single mother to 6-year-old Charlie --- a boy who has never known his father. After too many disappointments, she has given up on romance -- -and even, to some degree, friendships --- believing that it is always safer not to expect too much.

Although both women live in the same Boston suburb, the two have relatively little in common aside from a fierce love for their children. But one night, a tragic accident causes their lives to converge in ways no one could have imagined.

In alternating, pitch-perfect points of view, Emily Giffin creates a moving, luminous story of good people caught in untenable circumstances. Each being tested in ways they never thought possible. Each questioning everything they once believed. And each ultimately discovering what truly matters most.

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Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the opening lines of the novel: Whenever I hear of someone else's tragedy… I find myself reconstructing those final, ordinary moments. Moments that make up our lives. Moments that were blissfully taken for granted --- and that likely would have been forgotten altogether but for what followed. The before snapshots. Have you had an event in your life with a clear before and after? What were those snapshots for you?

2. Heart of the Matter is told from two points of view, Tessa's and Valerie's. How does this technique affect our view of the characters and their actions?

3. In what ways are Valerie and Tessa different? In what ways are they similar? With whom do you sympathize and identify more? Did you find yourself taking sides as their stories unfolded?

4. We never hear Nick's point of view, other than what he shares with Tessa and Valerie. What do you think of him as a person? A husband and father? A surgeon? Do you think your feelings would have changed had he been given a voice?

5. Valerie has closed herself off from personal relationships, both casual and romantic, claiming to only have time for her son, Charlie, and to a lesser extent her career as an attorney. How does meeting Nick change her? Does it affirm what she's always suspected? What do you think she'll be like moving forward?

6. In contrast to Valerie, Tessa seems to fit in perfectly in their social circle. Yet she, too, grapples with some of the social issues. In what ways is she different from the women around her?

7. How do money and materialism play a part in this novel? Social standing? Education?

8. What did you think of Romy Croft? Of April? Do you know similar people? Do you think their actions were misunderstood? How would you have reacted to Romy had you been in Valerie's shoes?

9. Do you think Tessa made the right decision to give up her career to become a stay-at-home-mother? Do you think the decision contributed to problems in her marriage? If so, why?

10. Are her mother's misgivings about Tessa's decision founded? How are her mother's views colored by her own past?

11. How was Tessa's reaction to Nick's transgressions shaped by the experience of her mother? Her friends? Her brother's seemingly perfect marriage? Who do you think has the more enviable life --- Tessa or Cate?

12. Why did Nick have an affair? Do you believe it was specific to Valerie or was there something missing in his marriage? Do you believe he was in love with Valerie? Was he telling the truth in the final chapter of the book? Do you subscribe to the notion "once a cheater, always a cheater"?

13. Do you think Valerie is a good mother? How much do you think Charlie factored into her decisions in this story? How much does she let Lion, and her past, influence her decisions?

14. Compare and contrast the mother-daughter relationships in this book. What makes these relationships so complex?

15. Why do you think women judge each other so much when it comes to personal decisions about work, motherhood, relationships?

16. At the end of the book, Tessa has a decision to make. Do you feel she made the right one? What would you have done? What do you see as the "heart of the matter" in this story? How is trust distinct from forgiveness? Do you think Tessa will forgive Nick? If so, will she learn to trust him?

17. Fast forward ten years. What do you see happening to each of these characters? Do you think they are happy? Why or why not? How will Nick and Valerie's affair continue to affect the lives of all three characters?

Author Bio

Emily Giffin, a Chicago native, graduated summa cum laude from Wake Forest University and the University of Virginia School of Law. After law school, she moved to Manhattan and practiced litigation at a large firm for several years while she paid back her school loans, wrote a novel in her very limited spare time, and dreamed of becoming a writer.

Despite the rejection of her first manuscript, Giffin persisted, retiring from the legal profession and moving to London to pursue her dreams fulltime. It was there that she began writing SOMETHING BORROWED (2004), a story of a young woman who, upon turning thirty, finally learned to take a risk and follow her heart. One year later, Giffin's own gamble paid off, as she completed her manuscript, landed an agent and signed a two-book deal on both sides of the Atlantic. The following summer, SOMETHING BORROWED, hailed as a "heartbreakingly honest debut" with "dead-on dialogue, real-life complexity and genuine warmth," became a surprise sensation, and Giffin vowed never to practice law again.

Dubbed a “modern day Jane Austen” (*Vanity Fair*) and a “dependably down-to-earth storyteller” (*New York Times*), Giffin has since penned five more *New York Times* bestsellers, SOMETHING BLUE (2005), BABY PROOF (2006), LOVE THE ONE YOU'RE WITH (2008), HEART OF THE MATTER (2010) and WHERE WE BELONG (2012). Her six novels, all filled with endearingly flawed characters and emotional complexity, have been translated into 29 languages, with 11 million copies in print worldwide. In addition, five of her novels have been optioned for the big screen and are in various stages of development. The first, *Something Borrowed*, hit theaters in May 2011, starring Kate Hudson, Ginnifer Goodwin and John Krasinski.

Giffin now resides with her husband and three young children in Atlanta. Her seventh novel, THE ONE & ONLY, was released on May 20, 2014.

Critical Praise

A thrill to read.

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