

Matrimony

by Joshua Henkin



About the Book

From the moment he was born, Julian Wainwright has lived a life of WASPY privilege. The son of a Yale-educated investment banker, he grew up in a huge apartment on Sutton Place, high above the East River, and attended a tony Manhattan private school. Yet, more than anything, he wants to get out --- out from under his parents' influence, off to Graymont College, in western Massachusetts, where he hopes to become a writer.

When he arrives, in the fall of 1986, Julian meets Carter Heinz, a scholarship student from California with whom he develops a strong but ambivalent friendship. Carter's mother, desperate to save money for his college education, used to buy him reversible clothing, figuring she was getting two items for the price of one. Now, spending time with Julian, Carter seethes with resentment. He swears he will grow up to be wealthy --- wealthier, even, than Julian himself.

Then, one day, flipping through the college facebook, Julian and Carter see a photo of Mia Mendelsohn. *Mia from Montreal*, they call her. Beautiful, Jewish, the daughter of a physics professor at McGill, Mia is --- Julian and Carter agree --- dreamy, urbane, stylish, refined.

But Julian gets to Mia first, meeting her by chance in the college laundry room. Soon they begin a love affair that --- spurred on by family tragedy --- will carry them to graduation and beyond, taking them through several college towns, over the next ten years. Then Carter reappears, working for an Internet company in California, and he throws everyone's life into turmoil: Julian's, Mia's, his own.

Starting at the height of the Reagan era and ending in the new millennium, MATRIMONY is about love and friendship, about money and ambition, desire and tensions of faith. It asks what happens to a marriage when it is confronted by betrayal and the specter of mortality. What happens when people marry younger than they'd expected? Can love endure the passing of time?

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Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the parent-child relationships in the novel. How much are the lives of Julian, Mia and Carter a rejection of their parents' lives? Despite how much they try to get away from the patterns of their parents, are they successful? Also consider Professor Chesterfield as a replacement father figure for Julian. What role does genetics play in the parent-child relationships?

2. In a book about a writer, what effect does the autobiographical component have on the story? Julian's desire to be a writer is a catalyst that drives the narrative. What does the novel say about the writer's life?
3. As Julian tried to comfort Mia when her mother was sick, Mia "felt her heart beat against him like something caged in, wings batting, slapping against themselves." What does this say about their relationship, and how is it reflected in their marriage?
4. Discuss the marriage of Julian and Mia. How do they complement each other (or not)?
5. How much is Julian's life ruled by the following idea: "Julian already felt, moments after graduating from college, that he was letting people down"? Consider which of Julian's decisions are either passive or made in order to please others.
6. Consider the following two quotations about Mia: "She felt suddenly that they weren't her friends, that despite all the time they'd spent together, they'd never really cared about her." "She felt desperate for him to know her better, felt a conviction that despite having been with her for three years, he didn't apprehend her at all." Are Mia's fears rational, or justified?
7. Mia and Julian were prompted to get married because of her mom's cancer, and then Mia's own cancer scare seems to push them into the decision to have children. Is this a good way to run a marriage? What is Henkin telling us about adult decisions and consequences?
8. Examine the trajectory of Carter and Pilar's relationship. What does it say about them?
9. Discuss the relationship between Carter and Julian. What does each of them bring to the friendship, and how do they affect each other's lives? Discuss the relationship between Mia and Pilar. In what ways are both of these relationships competitive? How are they each rivals?
10. The novel is structured around place. What is the significance of the college town? How do the different locales affect the couples?
11. How does the stress of choosing schooling and careers affect these couples?
12. Issues of money come up between both of the couples. What does the novel tell us about the role of money in marriages and in society? What role does class play in the characters' relationships and careers?
13. At the end of the novel, Julian forgives Carter. Do you agree with his decision?
14. Compare and contrast all of the couples in the novel (married and not). In total, what does the novel tell us about matrimony?
15. Novels about relationships are usually the terrain of women, but **Matrimony** is written by a man. How much does the gender of the author influence the narrative?
16. What is the role or importance of religion with these couples? Mia is Jewish but only seems to grasp at it during crucial times.
17. How does divorce play into the novel? Do you think it's traumatic for children no matter what age they are?
18. Discuss the infidelities in the novel. What role does betrayal play with these characters and in their marriages/relationships?

Author Bio

Joshua Henkin is the author of the novels **Swimming Across the Hudson** (a *Los Angeles Times* Notable Book) and **Matrimony** (a *New York Times* Notable Book). His stories have been published widely, cited for distinction in *Best American Short Stories* and broadcast on NPR's "Selected Shorts." He directs the MFA Program in Fiction Writing at Brooklyn College.

Critical Praise

"Radiates the kind of offbeat shoulder-shrugging charm that made Michael Chabon's *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* so memorable. . . . [**Matrimony**] gets to you and stays with you."

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