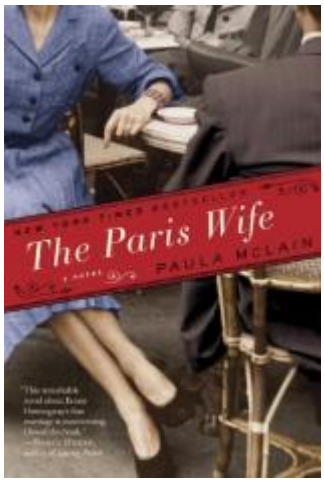
The Paris Wife

by Paula McLain



About the Book

A deeply evocative story of ambition and betrayal, THE PARIS WIFE captures a remarkable period of time and a love affair between two unforgettable people: Ernest Hemingway and his wife Hadley.

Chicago, 1920: Hadley Richardson is a quiet 28-year-old who has all but given up on love and happiness --- until she meets Ernest Hemingway and her life changes forever. Following a whirlwind courtship and wedding, the pair set sail for Paris, where they become the golden couple in a lively and volatile group --- the fabled “Lost Generation”--- that includes Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.

Though deeply in love, the Hemingways are ill prepared for the hard-drinking and fast-living life of Jazz Age Paris, which hardly values traditional notions of family and monogamy. Surrounded by beautiful women and competing egos, Ernest struggles to find the voice that will earn him a place in history, pouring all the richness and intensity of his life with Hadley and their circle of friends into the novel that will become THE SUN ALSO RISES. Hadley, meanwhile, strives to hold on to her sense of self as the demands of life with Ernest grow costly and her roles as wife, friend, and muse become more challenging. Despite their extraordinary bond, they eventually find themselves facing the ultimate crisis of their marriage --- a deception that will lead to the unraveling of everything they’ve fought so hard for.

A heartbreaking portrayal of love and torn loyalty, THE PARIS WIFE is all the more poignant because we know that, in the end, Hemingway wrote that he would rather have died than fallen in love with anyone but Hadley.

Discussion Guide

1. In many ways, Hadley's girlhood in St. Louis was a difficult and repressive experience. How do her early years prepare her to meet and fall in love with Ernest? What does life with Ernest offer her that she hasn't encountered before? What are the risks?

2. Hadley and Ernest don't get a lot of encouragement from their friends and family when they decided to marry. What seems to draw the two together? What are some of the strengths of their initial attraction and partnership? The challenges?

3. The Ernest Hemingway we meet in **The Paris Wife** --- through Hadley's eyes --- is in many ways different from the ways we imagine him when faced with the largeness of his later persona. What do you see as his character strengths? Can you see what Hadley saw in him?

4. The Hemingways spontaneously opt for Paris over Rome when the get key advice from Sherwood

Anderson. What was life like for them when they first arrived? How did Hadley's initial feelings about Paris differ from Ernest's and why?

5. Throughout The Paris Wife Hadley refers to herself as "Victorian" as opposed to "modern." What are some of the ways she doesn't feel like she fits into life in bohemian Paris? How does this impact her relationship with Ernest? Her self-esteem? What are some of the ways Hadley's "old-fashioned" quality can be seen as a strength and not a weakness?

6. Hadley and Ernest's marriage survived for many years in Jazz-Age Paris, an environment that had very little patience for monogamy and other traditional values. What in their relationship seems to sustain them? How does their marriage differ from those around them? Pound's and Shakespeare's? Scott and Zelda's?

7. Most of The Paris Wife is written in Hadley's voice, but a few select passages come to us from Ernest's point of view. What impact does getting Ernest's perspective have on our understanding of their marriage? How does it affect your ability to understand him and his motivations in general?

8. What was the role of literary spouses in 1920's Paris? How is Hadley challenged and restricted by her gender? Would those restrictions have changed if she had been an artist and not merely a "wife"?

9. At one point, Ezra Pound warns Hadley that it would be a dire mistake to let parenthood change Ernest. Is there a nugget of truth behind his concern? What are some of the ways Ernest is changed by Bumby's birth? What about Hadley? What does motherhood bring to her life, for better or worse?

10. One of the most wrenching scenes in the book is when Hadley loses a valise containing all of Ernest's work to date. What kind of turning point does this mark for the Hemingway's marriage? Do you think Ernest ever forgives her?

11. When the couple moves to Toronto to have Bumby, Ernest tries his best to stick it out with a regular "nine-to-five" reporter's job, and yet he ultimately finds this impossible. Why is life in Toronto so difficult for Ernest? Why does Hadley agree to go back to Paris earlier than they planned, even though she doesn't know how they'll make it financially? How does she benefit from supporting his decision to make a go at writing only fiction?

12. Hadley and Ernest had similar upbringings in many ways. What are the parallels, and how do these affect the choices Hadley makes as a wife and mother?

13. In The Paris Wife, when Ernest receives his contract for In Our Time, Hadley says, "He would never again be unknown. We would never again be this happy." How did fame affect Ernest and his relationship with Hadley?

14. The Sun Also Rises is drawn from the Hemingways' real-life experiences with bullfighting in Spain. Ernest and his friends are clearly present in the book, but Hadley is not. Why? In what ways do you think Hadley is instrumental to the book regardless, and to Ernest's career in general?

15. How does the time and place --- Paris in the 20's --- affect Ernest and Hadley's marriage? What impact does the war, for instance, have on the choices and behavior of the expatriate artists surrounding the Hemingways? Do you see Ernest changing in response to the world around him? How, and how does Hadley feel about those changes?

16. What was the nature of the relationship between Hadley and Pauline Pfeiffer? Were they legitimately friends? How do you see Pauline taking advantage of her intimate position in the Hemingway's life? Do you think Hadley is naïve for not suspecting Pauline of having designs on Ernest earlier? Why or why not?

17. It seems as if Ernest tries to make his marriage work even after Pauline arrives on the scene. What would Hadley it have cost Hadley to stick it out with Ernest no matter what? Is there a way she could have fought harder for her marriage?

18. In many ways, Hadley is a very different person at the end of the novel than the girl who encounters Ernest by chance at a party. How do you understand her trajectory and transformation? Are there any ways she essentially doesn't change?

19. When Hemingway's biographer Carlos Baker interviewed Hadley Richardson near the end of her life, he expected her to be bitter, and yet she persisted in describing Ernest as a "prince." How can she have continued to love and admire him after the way he hurt her?

20. Ernest Hemingway spent the last months of his life tenderly reliving his first marriage in the pages his memoir, A Moveable Feast. In fact, it was the last thing he wrote before his death. Do you think he realized what he'd truly lost with Hadley?

Author Bio

Paula McLain is the author of the novels CIRCLING THE SUN, THE PARIS WIFE and A TICKET TO RIDE, the memoir LIKE FAMILY: Growing Up in Other People's Houses, and two collections of poetry. She has received fellowships from Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

She lives in Cleveland with her family.

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Critical Praise

"Despite all that has been written about Hemingway by others and by the man himself, the magic of THE PARIS WIFE is that this Hemingway and this Paris, as imagined by Paula McLain, ring so true I felt as if I was eavesdropping on something new. As seen by the sure and steady eye of his first wife, Hadley, here is the spectacle of the man becoming the legend set against the bright jazzed heat of Paris in the 20s. As much about life and how we try and catch it as it is about love even as it vanishes, this is an utterly absorbing novel."

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