



The Good Husband

Gail Godwin

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"Mates are not always matches, and matches are not always mates," pronounces Magda Danvers, the magnificent central figure in Gail Godwin's wise and affecting new novel. With *The Good Husband*, one of America's most gifted novelists creates a portrait of two marriages and four unforgettable characters that travels beyond the usual questions of love and domestic comfort to explore the most profound consequences of intimate relationships. It is also, in its deepest sense, a novel about how we influence and transform - and sometimes complete - one another. As a young woman, brilliant, charismatic, and eternally curious, Marsha Danziger transformed herself into Magda Danvers, taking the academic world by storm with her controversial treatise on visionaries, *The Book of Hell*. She was already a star when she came upon Francis Lake in a midwestern seminary and married him, to everyone's surprise, including their own. It was a mating that seemed perfect: Magda pursued her career, and attentive, caring Francis devoted himself to Magda. Now, Magda's grave illness puts their marriage to its ultimate test. Even as she faces her "Final Examination," Magda's genius does not desert her. From her bed she continues to arouse her visitors with compelling thoughts and questions, which will change the lives of some of them. Into the heady atmosphere of Magda's provocative repartee comes Alice Henry, fresh from her own family tragedy. Magda's room soon becomes a refuge for Alice from her crumbling marriage to brooding Southern novelist Hugo Henry. But is it the incandescence of Magda's ideas that draws Alice, or the secret of "the good marriage" that she is desperate to discover? For Alice, Hugo, Francis, and Magda will learn that the most ideal relationship - even a perfect marriage - doesn't come without a price. Gracefully written, keenly insightful, intimate in its revelations, *The Good Husband* reverberates with the lives of its characters, their histories, and the most urgent l

The Good Husband Details

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Lori says

It is taking me a while to get going with this book. I hope something grabs me soon, or I'll be tempted to put it down. 3 weeks later I finally finished it. I don't think I am part of the intelligencia that would love this book. Too long and too boring and nothing resolved itself. A book about absolutely nothing.

Marlena says

I wanted to like this and kept hoping it would redeem itself, but watching someone's marriage decline for a whole book and then not having any redemption or resolution other than a couple pages of the separated spouses writing each other nice supportive letters at the end was frustrating.

Melanie says

It's been a long time since I read a Gail Godwin novel. I'd forgotten how gifted she is.

Maryjoamani says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, coming out of a long hiatus from reading novels. It's an old-fashioned kind of book, with writers and university college professors as main characters, and lots of literary references. An opening quote hints at the main theme--"Mates are not always matches, and matches are not always mates"--but I was struck more, by its call for us to be open to unplanned-for connections and consequences in life of even the simplest choices, to live fully and exuberantly doing what you are called to do, to find meaning in our actions, and to be true to our own stories. As Hugo Henry, an author in the novel, writes to a friend: "My novel is about what happens when one person, one single solitary person, learns to read and write--that's the bare bones of this tale. A young Southern gentleman takes his slave off to college to housekeep for him, and the slave secretly learns to read and write, and because of this everything is changed for everybody involved in the story. Literacy literally becomes destiny....We can't be free until we can our story, and only by telling it convincingly can we each do our bit to help the world grow up." I like this idea, that our own growth adds to the world growing up...

judy says

Her writing makes me draw in my breath over and over again. It's simply stunning. I loved this book for many reasons not the least of which is that the central character is who I'd like to be.

Mark McKenna says

It is said there are only seven great themes; I can only think of two: birth and death, love and loss. In "The Good Husband" these themes become Gail Godwin's canvas.

Magda Danvers is dying of cancer. Magda is a writer, a brilliant academician (think: Joseph Campbell) a great acerbic wit, and the author of a perennially re-printed work on the transcendent in literature.

Hugo Henry is a complicated, fifty-ish novelist, married to the lovely Alice; the couple have just lost their first child in a home birth.

As Magda dies and Alice and Hugo grow further apart, Alice begins an inner, one-sided love affair with Francis, Magda's loving and subordinate husband.

Both relationships are fully recounted and explored. Since Godwin has made Hugo Henry a successful (if insecure) novelist, we also get a behind-the-scenes look at the creative process -- both flowing and stalled -- as well.

All of these plots and sub-plots are played out against the ivory tower of Aurelia College: chairs are endowed, literary cruises created (to induce a large endowment); references to Donne, Blake, Dante and collegial infighting are sprinkled throughout.

"The Good Husband" offers wonderfully real people and situations. Magda's long death from cancer is written by an author who seems to have had direct experience with this form of death. The full palette of color is used and all figures faithfully drawn. There are no false lines in this book.

Roxanne says

Tedious and pretentious.

Jeannette Barnes says

This book was epiphany for me. I have admired, enjoyed, and followed the writing career of Gail Godwin now for, oh, roughly forty years. The style of this, the clarity, the wallop this prose packs is not the only reason why I love this novel. Nope. It's the people in this book, so real, so true to themselves and to life, who struggle so, especially with their own beloveds' deaths. And the central character whose slow dying precipitates all these marvelous designs is hooting, howlingly, excruciatingly funny, for a wonder, too.

One for the ages, y'all. Highly recommend.

Jeannette, who never praises lightly, from this other LA

Lobstergirl says

This was one of the books I came away with when I was at the library looking for ordinary novels. I wanted a bit of a rest from the classics, and from truly literary novels, which I think of as novels which are trying hard to use language well (sometimes succeeding, sometimes not). I wanted novels where plot and characters were strong, certainly not overwhelmed by language or literariness. *The Good Husband* was probably pretty close to precisely the kind of novel I was looking for, and it kind of sucked.

The plot concerns a fifty-something humanities professor named Magda who has just been given a terminal cancer diagnosis. Magda has chosen not to receive further treatment, but to convalesce and die at home under the care of her very, very caring house-husband Francis (he has spent their whole marriage caring for her, keeping house, cooking, etc.). Into their lives come Alice and Hugo Henry. Hugo is the writer-in-residence at the college where Magda teaches. Alice was his literary agent before Hugo proposed. Several months before the book opens, Alice and Hugo lost a baby boy during a home birth, and Alice has been hiding at home, not wanting to face the world. Befriending Magda and Francis and helping Francis care for Magda brings her out of isolation. Alice and Hugo's marriage had become increasingly rocky even before the loss of the baby, and as Magda gets ever closer to death, Alice feels herself drawn emotionally to Francis. Magda dies at about the novel's halfway point. There are several side plots: the homophobic Hugo finds out his adult son is gay and living with a lover, and happy and ambitious rather than the lazy layabout he thought him to be; Hugo meets a woman with lupus in his southern hometown who inspires his next novel; the college fundraisers organize an alumni cruise in Ireland on which the next stages of Francis's, Alice's, and Hugo's lives will be determined.

One of the things Godwin is doing is asking us to consider how the trajectories of lives are altered by the partners chosen. Did the caring house-husband Francis actually stifle Magda, by tending too closely to her needs? If Francis had had more of a life of his own, would Magda have published more books and been teaching at a more prestigious place than backwater Aurelia College? If Magda and Francis hadn't met, wouldn't Francis have continued on his path of becoming a priest? If Alice hadn't edited Hugo's novel, where would her life have gone?

The problem is that all of this is very boring. I actually found myself liking Alice, alone among the protagonists, but not caring about the plot whatsoever. Godwin's writing is very bland and pedestrian. (Why was this a New York Times Notable Book? Because NYT readers like reading about academics?)

Debby says

Overall, I guess I liked this book. That said, it was WAY too long. The writing just dragged in the last half to third of the book, but I was determined to finish it. The characters and story are interesting to a point, but after about 300 pages or so, it just got on my nerves. Like cut to the chase and wrap this thing up already!! It's better than a 2 star rating, but not by a lot!

I've heard good things about Godwin's writing, but *The Good Husband* didn't prove that to me! I'll be looking into her next book, *Evensong*, at some point in the future. I'm hoping for better things from *Evensong*.

Patricia says

Gale Godwin writes on a more spiritual level than most authors. Her book *Father Melancholy's Daughter* was one I will not forget. *The Good Husband* deals with spirituality, symbolism, and self-sacrifice without ever becoming saccharine or morbid. Excellent book.

Loie says

There are few books that I can not finish and this was one of them. After plodding through the first 150 pages I forced my self to go another 100 pages before I put it down last night and decided to leave it on the nightstand for good. There was not one character that was likeable or even remotely personable. I just got bored with the never ending complaining, harping and whining. Guess you can tell that I would not recommend this book

Marvin says

The characters are, as always in Godwin's books, wonderfully drawn in all their complexities, and the theme of how we die is a good one, but the relationships don't work as well for me in this one as in Godwin's other books.

Nancy says

I loved this book, mostly because it digs deeply into the relationships and motivations of two married couples. The main characters are very distinct. In the first half of the book Magda, a highly regarded and rather eccentric academician, is in the process of dying, which draws her husband and the other couple into a closer relationship. Each has dealt with tragedy or loss in the past. The ways in which they can and sometimes can't support each other are very familiar in real life. Another of the main characters is a novelist, who is struggling to produce and live up to his reputation. When I finished the book I was so glad that my edition included a conversation with the author, Gail Godwin, at the end, since I am not aware of any friends who had read the book, and it was the next best thing to talking with someone about it.

Jamie says

Godwin is the author of one of my favorite novels, *Evensong*.

This novel centers around 2 married couples in a small college town. One of the wives is dying from cancer

as her devoted younger husband cares for her. The other wife, recovering emotionally from the loss of a baby, befriends the couple as a way to escape from her own loss and crumbling marriage.

I didn't fall in love with this book the way I did with Evensong, but it was an engaging read.
