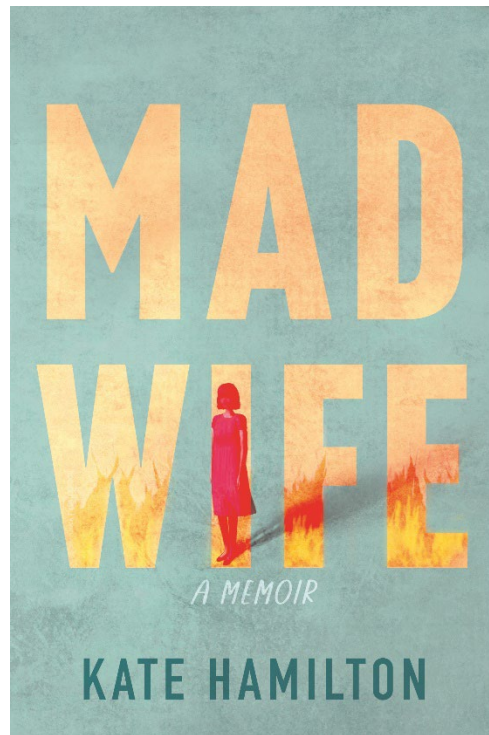


*Mad Wife: A Memoir* by Kate Hamilton

Book Club Discussion Questions



In a group setting, feel free to skip any question about personal experience you do not wish to discuss publicly. On your own, you might find considering these questions quite productive.

1. Why do you think Kate opens *Mad Wife* with a scene that begins with blissful sexual intimacy and ends with violent threats? Whom do you sympathize with, and do your sympathies change? What issues does the introduction raise, and how?
2. In chapter 1, Kate gives a graphic and emotionally intense description of how submitting to unwanted sex with her husband felt in the moment (pp. 8-10). How did these experiences affect Kate and her marriage over time? What issues around sex, consent, and marriage does this scene raise?
3. In chapter 2, Kate uses descriptions of photos to illustrate that her early marriage to Rick was happy and healthy (pp. 16-20). Why does she choose this method to establish this information? Do you find her evidence convincing? Can you see early signs of the damaging elements of their relationship to come?
4. What life experiences, personality traits, beliefs, or other factors contributed to the death of Kate and Rick's happy marriage? Did any of these resonate particularly with you, and if so, why? If couples counseling doesn't help a marriage recover from such things, what else can we do?

5. Kate and Rick both engage in sexual relationships with other people in attempts to keep their marriage going during its last years. How do those relationships differ? What are Kate's motivations, and what are Rick's? Which of these relationships would you call healthy or unhealthy, and why? What are their positive and negative effects on Kate and Rick individually and on their marriage?
6. How do Kate's ideas about affairs and swinging change between the time of her experience and the time of her writing, and why? If you've read other books about various kinds of open marriage or consensual non-monogamy, how do Kate's experiences and thoughts about them compare to others', and why?
7. In the variety of sexual encounters Kate documents in this book, which did she truly desire? Why did she submit to so many sexual encounters she didn't desire? Did she always know whether she desired sex or whether she was enjoying it? Have you ever been in situations where you acted against your desire or were not clear about your desire? Have you ever pressured someone else into sex? How do such situations arise? How might we handle them in the safest and healthiest ways?
8. Why do Kate and Rick go to such extreme lengths to sustain a marriage that was hurting both of them? What were Kate's reasons, and what were Rick's? Why do you think so many people stay in unhappy marriages? How does one know when leaving a marriage is the right thing to do?
9. In chapter 10, "What We Owe Each Other," Kate describes how "one of the most damaging effects of our cultural sanctification of marriage is how it trumps all other ethical matters" (p. 108). What are some of the "other ethical matters" that she and others ignored for the sake of preserving their marriages? How do we see suffering being used as a justification for harming others? Have you witnessed this kind of proliferation of harm in the name of protecting marriage in your own life or in public life? How might we short-circuit this cycle of damage?
10. What do Kate's description of the custody battle and the quotations from the trial transcript demonstrate about the values and biases of our family court system? How can one protect a child from an abusive parent when the court will not defend the child? Have you had or heard about a similar experience in family court? What can we do to center children's well-being both in and outside the court system?
11. What aspects of her experience does Kate struggle to remember, and why? Where and how else do you see evidence of trauma in this book? Does the process of writing *Mad Wife* seem to help Kate repair her memory and understanding? Where do you see evidence of this? Have you ever tried writing about a traumatic experience in your past, and if so, did you find it helpful?
12. What kinds of experiences make Kate feel empowered when she's really being disempowered? What allows her to see things differently? Have you had any similar experiences of "seeming liberation and pleasure" (p. 55) in your own life? How do you feel about them now? What does it mean to be empowered as a woman?

13. Do you find it shocking that a feminist professor was so blind to how she was being manipulated and abused? Why couldn't Kate see what was happening to her? What sources and experiences outside the academic world did she need to encounter in order to see things clearly, and why?
14. What roles do literature, feminist theory, and her teaching experiences play in Kate's understanding of her traumatic past? Do you find any of the literary references she includes particularly compelling? How do reading and discussing books shape your understanding of yourself and the world? Do you think books, especially memoirs, play an important role in social change?
15. When do you sympathize or empathize with Kate? When do you judge or disapprove of her? By the end of the book, do you feel differently about any of your earlier feelings or judgments about her? If so, why? What does Kate add to the conversation about desire, consent, marriage, and monogamy?
16. Kate ends the book by declaring herself "the monster" (p. 202). What does she mean by that? What elements of "monstrous women" in history and literature is she claiming? Do you think she finds being a "monster" a good thing or a bad thing?
17. How would you describe Kate's feelings toward Rick at various points in the book? When and why do we see them change? How does she seem to feel about him by the end of the book? What does Kate mean in the epilogue when she writes that she "believe[s] in [Rick's] story" of her (p. 206)?
18. Kate calls her experience of unwanted sex "forced consent" rather than "rape" (p. 190), though it affected her much as rape has affected other women. Do you think it matters what we call this kind of unwanted sexual experience? What would you call it, and why? Can you think of other kinds of abusive behavior in relationships that we normalize and ignore?
19. The author tells us in the introduction that "Kate Hamilton" is a pseudonym. Why didn't she publish *Mad Wife* under her own name? How does she feel about using a pseudonym? What does it allow her to accomplish, and what does it prevent her from accomplishing?
20. Near the end of the book, Kate writes that nearly every woman she's talked to about unwanted sex in marriage had a similar story. Have you ever talked with friends about this kind of experience? Do you think unwanted sex in marriage is a common problem in the US or in the world? If so, why do you think it is, and why do you think there is so little public acknowledgment of it? What can we do to change that?