

'Had me hooked from the first page'

JACQUELINE BUBLITZ, author of
Before You Knew My Name



Young.
Perfect.
Dangerous.

The Couple Upstairs

HOLLY
WAINWRIGHT

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
I GIVE MY MARRIAGE A YEAR



READING GROUP NOTES

BLURB

Five months after Mel told her husband to leave, a ghost has moved in upstairs.

A young man who reminds her, with eerie intensity, of a past lover, someone who changed her life and then vanished.

When the man's travelling girlfriend joins him, Mel's obsession with the couple upstairs builds and the boundaries between the two homes begin to blur, with devastating consequences.

The Couple Upstairs is about one strange summer of dazzling, curdling infatuation. Written with both a light touch and vivid intensity, Holly Wainwright explores love, regret, whether you can stop history repeating, and whether or not you should.

ABOUT HOLLY WAINWRIGHT

Holly Wainwright is a writer, editor and broadcaster who lives on the south coast of New South Wales with her partner and their young family. She's the Head of Content at women's media company Mamamia. *The Couple Upstairs* is her fourth novel.

A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE COUPLE UPSTAIRS

**** Please note, this introduction contains spoilers ****

Mel is a recently separated forty-something mother of two who lives in a small flat in a seaside suburb of Sydney. She is just picking up the pieces of her new single life (with no help from the global pandemic) when a ghost from her past moves in upstairs – or someone who looks very like him, at least.

Lori is a twenty-one-year-old British backpacker who has left her travelling companion behind and is taking a leap of faith, following her heart across the country to find out if the boy she met in Broome is 'the one'.

Flynn is both ghost and lover, a man with a troubled past and a mercurial charm, a beautiful face and charisma. He leads a rootless life, drifting from place to place as the mood takes him.

Lori settles into the sub-let apartment with Flynn and begins babysitting for Mel, who



watches their relationship from downstairs with growing concern. She begins to see parallels between what Lori and Flynn have and what she herself experienced with Dom, the man she thought was the love of her life in her twenties. That relationship had been passionate but hadn't ended well, leaving deeply etched scars, and Mel suspects the couple upstairs are headed in the same direction.

As things escalate and Flynn's controlling behaviour starts to become physical, Mel arrives home one night to see Flynn hurting Lori out the front of the apartment block. She decides it's time to take action. Enlisting the help of her ex, Simon, and Kat, Flynn's childhood friend and seemingly an unlikely ally, Mel concocts a plan to spirit Lori away to safety while teaching Flynn a lesson about the seriousness of his behaviour.

After New Year, they carry out the plan and Lori spends a week in an empty holiday house down the coast. Flynn is shaken to the core by her disappearance – but mainly by how it affects him personally – and decides to do what he always does: he leaves. With Flynn gone, Mel and Kat bring Lori back and she explains to the police that she was fleeing a domestic violence situation.

Having helped Lori, Mel feels she has finally exorcised the ghost of her past relationship with Dom, and can look forward to her future. Lori and Kat choose to stay together in the flat upstairs until it's time to move on. Together, the women publish details online about the abusive behaviour of Flynn and another man Rob, who tried to assault Lori on her travels, thereby bringing them and their treatment of Lori to public attention.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The Couple Upstairs* is written in the third person, past tense, and divided between the perspectives of the three protagonists, Mel, Lori and Flynn. What are some of the ways the author differentiates each voice from the others? How does this writing style influence your perception of each of the characters' stories?
2. The novel is set in a beachside suburb of Sydney's east. In what ways does the setting play a role in each of the characters' stories?
3. Mel and Lori are both English, whereas the other main characters in the novel are Australian. Does this play a part in the novel? Does the fact that they are from very different parts of England make a difference?
4. Mel sees in Flynn many characteristics that raise red flags for her after her abusive relationship with Dom. What are some of these? In what ways are Flynn and Dom similar, and how are they different?
5. While physical violence is present in both relationships featured in the novel to some extent, in what other ways were these two relationships abusive? Are these forms of domestic violence all clear-cut? If not, why not, do you think?
6. From the start, there are signs that Flynn's thoughts about their relationship are not the same as Lori's. What are some of these signs? Why does it become harder and harder for Lori to extricate herself from this situation?
7. Like Flynn, Kat had a troubled upbringing. What role does Kat play for all three protagonists throughout the novel? Are her loyalties always clear? Do you think she has come through her childhood differently from Flynn? Discuss.
8. Mel's relationship with Simon was, on paper, entirely different from her relationship with Dom. Simon is dependable, stable, reliable, respectful and safe. Why, then, do you think the marriage didn't work out? What might this suggest about intimate relationships in general?
9. It is easier to identify and condemn Rob's more overtly malicious behaviour in the novel than Flynn's. Discuss.
10. Although not spelled out, the novel is set during the COVID-19 pandemic. How do the circumstances of the global pandemic affect the characters and their situations?
11. Both Mel and Lori describe their intimate physical relationships with their abusive partners as incredibly passionate. How does this affect their ability to see their situation clearly, do you think?
12. After the fateful day in the national park, in which Flynn frightens Lori by pretending to drop her near the cliff edge and she calls him a bully, Lori finds herself trying to

make amends for Flynn's anger and bad mood by giving him a blow job on the way home. Why do you think she does this? What does this episode suggest to you about both Lori and Flynn, and their relationship?

13. What role does Mel's sister Izzy play in her life and in the novel?
14. Lori's friend Jools asks Lori about Flynn, *Is he still a dickhead?* and Lori replies, *Not a dickhead. Just different.* In what ways does Lori justify the less edifying aspects of Flynn's behaviour to herself and others?
15. How is the age gap between Lori and Mel illustrated in the novel, and how does it, and their different life experiences, affect the ways the two characters approach their situations?
16. Why do you think Mel goes to the lengths she does to help Lori, when the plan that unfolds could have serious consequences for them both? Is this about more for Mel than just helping another woman in need?
17. Do you think Mel's plan was the best way to address this issue? What else could she and/or Lori have done? What might have been the pitfalls involved in going directly to the police with a claim of domestic violence in this situation?
18. On page 283, Mel says:

'It's not changing,' said Mel. 'Something should have changed, between twenty years ago and today. But it's the same shit. We have a daughter, Simon. Don't you want it to change for her?'

Why do you think it is so difficult to effect change with the issue of domestic violence in our society? What do you think are some of the contributing factors, and why is it so hard to break the cycle of harm down the generations?