

Second Honeymoon

By Joanna Trollope

Reading Group Guide

The discussion questions that follow are designed to enhance your group's conversation about Joanna Trollope's *Second Honeymoon*, a candid and compassionate novel about the uncertainties of modern family life, when the children are grown but find themselves migrating back to their parents' nest.

About this book

What do you get when the youngest child of the family leaves home – an empty nest, or a second honeymoon? Russell and Edie Boyd, parents of three grown children, have different ideas of how their marriage should proceed, now that they are alone in the house. Edie mourns the loss of her identity as a full-time mother, but soon returns to work as a stage actress. Russell vies for his wife's undivided attention, but as Edie's focus shifts from motherhood to the theatre, Russell resigns himself to reviving his career instead of his marriage.

The ramshackle Boyd house isn't quiet for long. As the lead actress in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Edie takes her "stage son," a fledgling actor named Laszlo, under her wing, moving him into her and Russell's home. The three Boyd children face difficult decisions that compromise their domestic independence. The eldest, Matthew, moves into his childhood room after his career-driven girlfriend, Ruth, buys an apartment that Matthew can't afford, tipping the balance of their relationship. Rosa, the middle child, is faced with mounting debts, and eventually swallows her pride and returns home, catching Laszlo's eye. Ben, the youngest sibling, is delighted to move in with his girlfriend, Naomi, but ends up on his parents' sofa when Naomi needs the space to choose Ben on her own. With the Boyd home now crowded and chaotic, Edie realizes the trouble of getting the full house she once wanted, and resolves to seize the life changes that she once feared.

For discussion

1. The novel opens with two acts of housekeeping: Edie surveys the wreckage of Ben's old room, and Russell starts emptying "Dad's shed" (6). How do Edie and Russell approach their tasks differently? What do these chores reveal about Edie and Russell's attitudes toward their domestic situation?
2. Edie recalls a quote from Hendrik Ibsen, the playwright of *Ghosts*: "Ibsen had been obsessed with the past. He'd written once that 'we sail with a corpse in the cargo.' Ibsen was, Edie decided, the very last thing she needed at the moment" (36). Why is this Ibsen quote so upsetting to Edie? How does it relate to her life?
3. As a child in the Boyd house, Matthew's sturdy gum boots were "his salvation... They seemed to be able to insulate him from fear, from the unknown, to protect him while still

letting him see what lay ahead” (38). How does the loss of this “mechanism for consolation” (38) shape Matthew’s character? As an adult, is he bold or timid, decisive or wavering in his actions? Do Ruth and the baby on the way have the potential to ground Matthew, as his gum boots once did? Why or why not?

4. Rosa assumes that “home is home until you have one of your own” (44). Is this an accurate definition of “home?” Why or why not? What is the difference between a house and a home?

5. Edie accuses Russell of selfishly wanting her “undivided attention” (136); Ben admits to Naomi, “I expect I’m a bit jealous” (222); and Barney Ferguson tells his wife Kate, “I just want you to myself” (52). Why is each male character reluctant to share the attention of his wife or girlfriend? Is this a specifically masculine desire, or do the women in the novel exhibit similar needs?

6. Matthew calls his and Ruth’s struggle for financial equality “the fragile equilibrium of modern partnership” (42). How does this phrase about contemporary relationships apply to the other couples in the novel: Russell and Edie, Vivien and Max, Ben and Naomi, Kate and Barney, and Rosa and Laszlo?

7. Standing in Kate’s kitchen, Rosa imagines her family members in their own domestic realms: “Edie in her kitchen, herself in Kate’s, Matt and Ruth no doubt buying Alessi-inspired kettles for theirs, Ben and Naomi blissfully not giving kitchens a thought” (86). What does this comparison of kitchens reveal about Rosa’s perceptions of her family? To what degree can the reader trust Rosa’s assumptions?

8. Consider the relationship between Edie and Vivien. Do the sisters get along? How do they support each other emotionally? How do they handle their roles as mothers and wives differently?

9. At Edie’s audition for *Ghosts*, the producer tells her that Mrs. Alving is “a woman who has *suffered*,” to which Edie replies, “How do you know I haven’t?” (54). What personal experience does Edie bring to her role as Mrs. Alving? How does Laszlo’s evolving personal life impact his performance as Osvald?

10. Russell tells Matthew, “Things are much harder now.... We were stifled by too little choice, you are panicked by too much” (147). How does this definition of contemporary young adulthood – a daunting array of choices – apply to the other characters in *Second Honeymoon*? Of all the Boyds and their friends, who is handling the anxiety of decision-making the best? Ruth’s pregnancy is “a fact, and not a choice of any kind” (288); how does this lack of choice affect Matthew and Ruth?

11. How does the structure of the novel, with its alternating points of view, affect the progress of the story? What is Trollope’s primary method of character development: dialogue, description, or another technique? Choose a passage from the book in which one of the main characters is distinctly characterized.

12. At the beginning of the book, Russell describes the Boyd house as “quite simply, a given in his life” (10). Yet by the last chapter, Edie equates living in the house with “years of habit which had, over time, quietly and insidiously become a prison” (317). What has caused Edie and Russell’s radical shift of opinion about where to live?
13. Discuss the nature of the modern conflict that Rosa calls ““this woman and ambition thing”” (122). How do Edie, Ruth, Rosa, and Kate struggle with the decision between career and family? Do any of these characters come to a healthy balance among work, romance, and children? What does Trollope seem to be saying about this predicament among today’s women?
14. The necessity of change is a primary theme of the novel. In the words of Edie’s imaginary fairy godmother, ““Nothing, you see, stands still”” (321). Which characters try to change their loved ones? Do they succeed? Are Trollope’s characters victims of circumstance, or do they bring about their own life changes?
15. What is the tone at the end of the novel? Is this a happy ending, or an ambiguous one? Which characters seem likely to succeed in their new living situations, and what new challenges might they face?
16. On her website, JoannaTrollope.com, the author states that in her writing, “I set out to present a fresh view on various old assumptions.” What snap judgments might the reader make about the characters in *Second Honeymoon*, and how are these initial assumptions altered by the end of the book?

Suggested reading

Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*; Sue Miller, *While I Was Gone*; Anne Roiphe, *Fruitful*; Maile Meloy, *Liars and Saints*; Elizabeth Berg, *Say When*; Jacqueline Mitchard, *The Breakdown Lane*; Melissa Bank, *The Wonder Spot*; Maeve Binchy, *Tara Road*; Anita Shreve, *The Last Time They Met*; Ali Smith, *The Accidental*; Sue Monk Kidd, *The Mermaid Chair*; Lisa Gunwald, *Whatever Makes You Happy*; Mavis Cheek, *Mrs. Fytton’s Country Life*.

Joanna Trollope, the nationally bestselling author of sixteen other books, including *Brother & Sister*, *Marrying the Mistress*, and *The Rector’s Wife*, lives in Gloucestershire, England.