

AUTHOR OF *GOOD NEIGHBORS*

Sarah Langan

"Flat-out brilliant!"

—PAUL TREMBLAY,
New York Times bestselling
author of *Horror Movie*



A NOVEL

Trad Wife

READING GROUP GUIDE

*This reading group guide for **Trad Wife** includes an introduction, discussion questions and a Q&A with author Sarah Langan. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

Every day, millions watch Mia Wright, the "trad wife" queen, on her idyllic 300-acre farm. With her handsome husband, seven perfect children, and a life of from-scratch meals and pastoral bliss, she's an icon of modern femininity. But behind every perfect image is a secret. And in this case, the secret is a horror.

Desperate to save her tarnished career, journalist Jenny Kaplan arrives at Black Swan Farm to profile Mia. Jenny is ready to write a scathing exposé, determined to expose the deception behind Mia's curated life. But soon, Jenny has more to contend with than staged videos and picture-perfect poses. There's something wrong at the farmhouse. Something slithers through Jenny's dreams, and at night, the children sing strange nursery rhymes.

She's losing time. She's losing her hair. She starts to worry that she's losing her mind.

There is a horror at the heart of Black Swan, and it's waiting just for Jenny. *Trad Wife* will make you question what's real and what's just a perfectly curated deception...

Will you see the lie?



TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

ACT I

- 1.** Jenny describes journalism as a ladder without a top. The novel goes on to characterize the disintegration of institutions she'd once depended on. How does this contribute to her isolation? What is driving that collapse?
- 2.** Why does Jenny pen a confessional when she'd prefer to publish hard-hitting journalism? Can this be connected in any way to Mia Wright's use of "accidents?" Or is Jenny finding her true voice?
- 3.** Why do you think Jenny is cancelled by The Brotherhood of the American Agenda?
- 4.** Is Mia manipulating Jenny by pretending to need help? Is there an unspoken code that women must always follow?
- 5.** Blair Roberts, a conventional homemaker, is hurt by Mia Wright's multi-level marketing business. Is this fair, given that she chose to enroll?
- 6.** Jenny raised her sister Melissa and they love each other deeply—so what explains the strain in their relationship?
- 7.** Was it wrong of Jenny to publish Drano, given it might hurt Jarron? Should she apologize to him?
- 8.** Jenny decides to return to Black Swan after Mia's post of her holding baby Isaac goes viral. Why? What does she stand to gain—and what does she risk losing?



TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

ACT II

- 1.** How is Phil Parmet different from other characters in the novel so far? Why does his perspective feel so emotionally distant?
- 2.** Despite so many gains, is it possible that women's roles have recently regressed? How does this explain the popularity of Trad Wives? After a kind of revolution of freedom, are women being pushed back into restrictive roles? Who benefits?
- 3.** Why is Jenny so relieved when Mia tells her she's not in physical danger? Why is it so hard for her to ask that question outright?
- 4.** Jenny avoids thinking about upsetting memories, fearing she'll fall apart. But these things from her past seem to haunt her. Why?
- 5.** Jenny quickly becomes concerned about Mia's drinking and the "accidents" involving her children. This happens especially with Victoria and her asthma. Have you ever witnessed or experienced a medical gaslighting?
- 6.** Why does Jarron's mother blame Jenny for his breakdown?
- 7.** After Jenny's abortion, her friends take her out for brunch. All but one knows what happened. Why didn't she tell that fourth friend? Why didn't she tell her sister? In what ways is shame internal? In what ways is it imposed by external forces like The Brotherhood of the American Agenda?



TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

ACT II

- 8.** Why does Jenny stay at Black Swan Farm even after it becomes clear something is very wrong? Does her past make her more susceptible to gaslighting? Society? Her character?
- 9.** Ashley Vonnegut also stayed in a dangerous situation instead of leaving when smoke filled her town. Her reasons were both financial and internalized. It's why she became a Black Swan Ambassador. Are there times in your life when you stayed in a situation you wish you'd left?
- 10.** Steadman trauma-dumps on Jenny when he catches her throwing out Mia's empty bottles. As the days pass, he begins to mistake Jenny for Mia. While there are supernatural elements at play, what other factors might explain this?
- 11.** The mundane realities of childcare consume much of Jenny's time at Black Swan. How does the image of motherhood compare to its reality? Are there moments of joy within that tension?
- 12.** Jenny's article is changed by Mia. In many ways, this is the novel's greatest betrayal. How did you respond to this moment?



TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

ACT III

1. How does body horror operate within the context of this story?
2. Hair plays a significant role in this novel. Describe its symbolism.
3. Readers all want Jenny to escape. Why does it make sense that she doesn't? Is there any form of victory within her captivity?
4. Is Mr. Yellow real?
5. The novel suggests that women are losing their rights because of larger forces—a kind of horrific, generational conspiracy (the curse). Is this driven by human nature, or is money (radicalized social media clicks, political PACs, for-profit religions) to blame?
6. What does it mean to surrender your name?
7. Can parallelisms be drawn between Trad Wives and the manosphere? Does the system benefit from placing men in restrictive roles as well?
8. What do you think happens to Jenny, Mia, and Victoria next?



PATRIARCHY, PROFIT, AND PRAIRIE DRESSES: SARAH LANGAN IN CONVERSATION WITH OLIVIE BLAKE

OB: How do you define a "trad wife"? How is it different than women who occupy largely traditional feminine roles, such as stay-at-home caregivers? Because I found that while promoting *GIRL DINNER*, a lot of people didn't immediately understand that what I was criticizing were the subculture of influencers who make their lifestyle a social media brand—which is actually a job and therefore not traditional at all—rather than all women who choose to stay home for various reasons. The thing that made me want to write about tradwives was when I read that tradwife content was likely propagated by men. It was like wow, of course, because who benefits from this? Basically, one woman, conditional on whether her husband actually lets her have that money, and a whole patriarchal structure!

SL: I loved *GIRL DINNER*. And I think we're on the same page.

Trad Wives are social media influencers who earn their living by posting content. They wear old fashioned clothing, work professional jobs out of their kitchens, and encourage other women to assume traditional roles within the home, ceding agency and income to their husbands. It's a paradox, because the influencers gain financial independence by taking it from their fans.

But it's also important to acknowledge that fans aren't dumb. Women aren't quitting their day jobs en masse after a day of Trad Wife scrolling. The thing is, images imprint. They influence. They get inside you.

I don't know any Trad Wives. Their content is charming. But I'm troubled by the platforms that overrepresent them, that seek to monetize extremes, that plug into our hindbrains and influence the way we think about one another.



Many of my friends follow Trad Wives. Some even buy the products. So, I didn't know that most audiences are male! But that tracks. Trad Wives are the mirror image of the manosphere.

OB: Overrepresented is a really good way to put it.

Something I read as a major theme in *TRAD WIFE* is the question of the ethics or obligation of a storyteller. If you consider an influencer as a type of storyteller, what do they owe to their audience? Should the influencer be accountable for harm or negligence as a result of that influence, as with the women who went into debt after buying into Mia Wright's MLM? Is Jenny accountable for any damage to her boyfriend after incorporating his story into her own? What are the ethics of things that blur the lines, like autofiction, reality television, or social media influencing?

SL: *I wrestled with this as an author—I wanted to make sure I didn't vilify women I've never met, who've done me no harm. While their overall effect may be harmful to the culture, and they are responsible for their choices, the platform is the villain. It's like blaming actors for their material.*

Then again, is Mia hurting women? Absolutely. You can draw a direct line: she lures Jenny, replaces her, and frees herself at Jenny's expense. Which is exactly what multi-level marketing schemes tend to do. I deep-dived Mary Kay while writing this novel. Turns out, most women bought their own pink Cadillacs. Either they indoctrinated a lot of downstream reps to increase their percents, or they bought their own product.

Last thing to mention here is Jenny, and I think I'm in the minority. It never occurred to me that she should be sorry for Drano! She wrote the truth as she saw it. But every beta reader was like: can't she apologize? It makes me like her less. And I was like: ...nooooo.

OB: I'm definitely not arguing that Jenny should apologize! But it's an interesting parallel, given that at least one person in the story felt she owed reparations in some way.

Okay, another theme that grounds a lot of your work is the ethos of the story's community. Many characters emphasize that Mia Wright is important



to their town, and you build the world that surrounds her farm in a thoughtful and eerie way. What elements did you consider in building the world of *TRAD WIFE*?

SL: *I think world building comes so naturally that none of it registers consciously. It kind of just happens. I wanted Phil the photographer to have a different point of view than everyone else. He's a free spirit, who offers another alternative. I assumed his friends were successful artists and, in his world, gender doesn't apply.*

I was also inspired by "Fargo" Season 5. Early on, the main character in that show is judged by the policewoman, who assumes she's privileged. But then they come to understand each other. Jenny and the waitress understand each other.

I like the idea of a town that relies on one industry, probably because I live in Los Angeles. It can be corrupting. People never quite say what they mean. When things are good, they're very good and when they're bad... oh, boy.

OB: This is a horror novel with a clear and specific villain as opposed to social commentary about traditional feminine roles, but of course the impetus is easy enough to identify. Why this book, and why now?

SL: *Right to the chewy center!*

Roe V. Wade got overturned, #MeToo is dead, and now chicks in prairie costumes have millions of followers. It feels pretty intentional. It also feels scary.

What I'm seeing in Hollywood and in the world in general is a return to conservatism. It was financially expedient to wave a pink flag a few years ago; now it isn't. Turns out, all those guys shouting, "I have daughters!" were not actually concerned about their daughters. This new conservatism is a turn of the kaleidoscope lens, and some of the point of the book. But the larger point—the skew of the entire kaleidoscope—is about the ways in which profit-driven multi-national corporations have usurped agency from individual governments and people. Jenny should be



a hard-hitting journalist. Instead, she's basically a blogger. The institutions we once depended on (and took for granted) are falling apart. It doesn't have to be that way. Or I hope it doesn't.

For a variety of reasons, I was reluctant to depict an abortion in the novel. I'm not doing it to provoke or trigger. But the story was body horror, about a woman losing her agency. Keeping abortion out of the conversation would have been its own kind of violence.

OB: Absolutely.

This is maybe a spoilery question, but were there any regional or historical legends/folklore that inspired *TRAD WIFE*?

SL: *I made it all up! But I borrowed from Yellow Wallpaper and King in Yellow. References like that can be perceived as arrogant, but I was coming from a place of homage—of building and answering questions posed by previous generations. At one point, Corrie and her sisters are sitting on plastic beach chairs from Wal-Mart. I took that out and put it back in 10 times. It's an elision to Stephen King, who always imbues his magic with the mundane, and I had the feeling readers would know that.*

(SPOILER) OB: You know, Mia trapping Jenny and feeling no apparent grief about it is really a great microcosm for trad wives who sell their lifestyles as desirable at the cost of, oh, whatever, political and financial autonomy. That's more of a comment than a question, I just have all this rage to file somewhere.

SL: *I wanted her to get out. But if I'd ended it differently, the story wouldn't be as resonant. In some ways, I owed it to Jenny to tell her truth, even if it wasn't a happy one. Regarding rage:*

I.

-CLAP!-

Hear.

-CLAP!-

You.

-CLAP!-



WHAT TO READ AFTER *TRAD WIFE*

The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn

House of Leaves by Mark Danielewski

Fates and Furies by Lauren Groff

Girl Dinner by Olivie Blake

The Crucible by Arthur Miller

Witchcraft for Wayward Girls by Grady Hendrix

Hangsaman by Shirley Jackson

The King in Yellow by Robert Chambers

FOR YOUR VIEWING PLEASURE

Watcher, dir. Chloe Okuno

Get Out, dir. Jordan Peele

Hereditary, dir. Ari Aster

Obvious Child, dir. Gillian Robespierre

Always, Sometimes, Rarely, Never, dir. Eliza Hitman

True Detective Season 1, showrunner dir. Nic Pizzolatto

Fargo Season 5, showrunner Noah Hawley

Mad Men, showrunner Matt Weiner

Sharp Objects, showrunner Marti Noxon

LET'S KEEP IN TOUCH!

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