

"PAINFUL AND BRILLIANT—I LOVED IT." —ELIF BATUMAN

# LIARS

READING GROUP GUIDE

A NOVEL

 HOGARTH

SARAH MANGUSO

AUTHOR OF *VERY COLD PEOPLE*

## A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I'm frequently asked whether it's possible to be a writer and a mother, but no one's ever asked me whether it's possible to be a writer and a wife.

My new novel, *Liars*, blows open the doors into a marriage between an artist and a writer.

After Jane and John have a child, their formerly equal partnership becomes a traditional nuclear family. It's easier for John to earn more, for Jane to run the house, for the family to move from city to city as John builds his career and Jane watches her professional life disappear. Jane is shocked by how quickly and meekly they give in to the patriarchal systems that contain them.

It's so easy to label an agitated, tearful woman as crazy; after all, abuse can cause memory loss, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and uncontrollable rage. Jane tries to summarize what's happened to her marriage but can't manage to see it all at once; this leaves her effectively trapped in a story she can't narrate her way out of . . . until she can.

Thank you for picking up *Liars*. It's my ninth book, but it's the first one I've written as a single woman.

Sincerely,  
Sarah Manguso

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was your biggest takeaway from *Liars*?
2. Explore the nature of domesticity in *Liars*. How do Jane and John evolve before and after they marry? How did marriage make liars of them both?
3. Jane's story of wifehood, motherhood, and divorce is singular—yet, as she often reminds the reader, it's also typical. “I got enmeshed in a story that had already been told ten billion times,” she writes. And: “I was exactly as angry as every other woman I knew.” What do you make of this dichotomy?
4. What are the key moments or turning points that lead to Jane's realization about the nature of their relationship? How does Jane's anger manifest, and what does it reveal about her character and challenges?
5. If you were in Jane's shoes, do you think you would have ended the relationship earlier? If so, when? What do you think stops Jane from ending the relationship at that point?
6. What emotions did *Liars* make you feel? What specific scenes or passages contributed?
7. Common wisdom dictates that there are two sides to every story. Consider Jane's: Do you think that hers is the true retelling of events? In what way would this book have been different if John had been its narrator?
8. Talk about how the birth of Jane's son changes the power dynamic in her marriage. You may wish to discuss your own experiences with the shifting of duties, affections, and/or identities in our families as well.
9. Explore the theme of ambition and its impact on Jane and John's marriage. How do their individual aspirations and desires clash or align over the course of the story?
10. What did you think of the ending of the novel?

## BOOKS AND FILMS THAT INSPIRED ME By Sarah Manguso

*Heroines*, Kate Zambreno (book)

The **tragedy** of the brilliant, ambitious, silenced wife.

*In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado (book)

The **horror story** that gets gaslighting just right.

*Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Bruxelles*, Chantal Akerman (film)

The **cult film** that dangles a tantalizing correction.

*Leave a Cheater, Gain a Life*, Tracy Schorn (book)

The **bible** for people leaving covert abusers.

*Majorité Opprimée*, Éléonore Pourriat (film)

The **thought experiment** that forces confrontation with patriarchal violence.

*The Mental Load*, Emma (comic)

The **master class** that explains why wives and mothers are angry.

“The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman (short story)

The **perennial** “crazy wife” story retold by its victim.