

"At times beautiful, devastating, and complex, *Mrs. Kimble* explores the interplay between deception and vulnerability, betraying Haigh's ambitious talent in the process." —*Chicago Tribune*

MRS. KIMBLE



A Novel



JENNIFER HAIGH

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 HarperCollins e-books

The author wishes to thank Claire Wachtel, Michael Morrison, Juliette Shapland, and Dorian Karchmar at Lowenstein Associates, for their extraordinary support of this book;

James Michener and the Copernicus Society of America, for their generous financial assistance; and

Dan Pope, for everything else.

Contents

E-book Extras:

[Author's Note](#)

[An Interview with Jennifer Haigh](#)

[Reading Group Guide](#)

[The man died alone...](#)

[Birdie](#)

[Joan](#)

[1972](#)

[Dinah](#)

[1994](#)

[Spring](#)

[Praise for Mrs. Kimble](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Mrs. Kimble didn't begin as a treatise on marriage and divorce. The book, as I first conceived of it, was about a single mother and her child: Birdie (Ken Kimble's first wife) and her son Charlie. As I wrote about these two, I became increasingly curious about Charlie's father. I found myself very drawn to this character, a man who is defined largely by his absence. I wanted to know who he was, how he came into Birdie's life, and where he went when he left.

Ken Kimble is what I call a "serial husband"—a man who marries again and again, who somehow, in spite of his obvious flaws, has no problem finding women to marry. It's a phenomenon I've observed a few times in life, one that raises an obvious question: what exactly is wrong with the women, so willing to pledge their lives to a man they barely know? The answer, I think, has to do with the way women are socialized. We're raised to believe that marriage is what completes us, that unless we've achieved that particular goal, nothing else we accomplish counts for much. This belief has survived feminism, the sexual revolution, the sweeping social changes of the past 50 years. Women, even bright, successful women, still subscribe to it. One result of thinking this way is that we marry the wrong men.

The three Mrs. Kimbles are women of different generations; they have different expectations of men, and of themselves. Birdie is a product of the 1950s, a woman who resists learning to drive, who is perfectly happy being a passenger. Joan is in many ways a woman ahead of her time; she chooses career over marriage in an era when few women did, but she's ambivalent about her choices, and in the end chooses a more traditional life. Dinah, who's much younger, expects more from a husband; she's frustrated that Ken isn't a more involved father to their son. Birdie, on the other hand, would have been content to do all the child-raising herself as long as Ken came home every night, paid the bills, acted like a husband, even if he wasn't faithful to her.

Mrs. Kimble also looks at the changing shape of family, what that word means in an era of rampant divorce, of blended families with all their prefixes: step-this, half-that. Early in the novel, Birdie's shame over being divorced is part of the reason she drinks. She lies about where her husband is; Charlie, who's only seven years old, picks up on her shame and starts lying about it too. At the end of the book we see something of how the world has changed in 25 years, a recognition that blended families can be quite happy and functional, prefixes and all.

The three Mrs. Kimbles aren't victims. Ken Kimble isn't some kind of sociopath. He is, in fact, a very ordinary man; he simply takes what is given to him. He is in some sense a blank slate, a cipher; and that works to his advantage. Birdie, Joan and Dinah are looking for different things; yet each is able to convince herself that Ken Kimble is what's missing from her life. The novel examines how and why that happens. In that way *Mrs. Kimble* truly is a meditation on marriage: why women hunger for it, what we're willing to sacrifice in order to have it.

I hope that you enjoy *Mrs. Kimble*.

Mrs. Kimble
A Novel
by Jennifer Haigh

How did producing a full-length novel compare to writing short stories? Was it a challenge to create three distinct but intertwining narratives for *Mrs. Kimble*?

Short stories are to novels what dating is to a long marriage. A new story is very exciting; there's a wonderful sense of discovery that comes with inventing and exploring new characters. Because a novel takes so long to write, you're still plugging away at it long after the initial glow has faded. Novelists, like spouses, don't get to start from scratch when the novelty wears off. They're living with the choices they made days, months, years before.

Is there a part of you in any of Ken's wives, or in Ken himself?

I identify with all the characters in the book. More strongly with the wives, but with Kimble too. Some readers seem to disagree, but I never thought of him as a sociopath. He is in many ways a very ordinary person. He simply takes what is given to him.

The voice with which you narrate *Mrs. Kimble* is very distinctive; the sentence structure is honest without being sparse, while your dialogue sounds casual but almost always carries an emotionally charged subtext. Did this voice evolve while you were a student in Iowa, or has it always been your vehicle for storytelling?

The narrative voice of *Mrs. Kimble* is very much my voice; I think it comes through in all my work. I aim for precision in the sentences because that's the sort of writing I admire. I have a great respect for writers who are humble, whose language allows the reader to see the story but doesn't get in the way. Language is a window, and if the window is clean, you shouldn't be aware you're looking through glass.

Do you consider *Mrs. Kimble* to be a cautionary tale?

I didn't intend *Mrs. Kimble* as a cautionary tale, just a story about life. Then again, life is instructive, we draw lessons from our own experiences and other peoples'.

Any plans for your next novel?

I am now deep into my next novel. It's like *Mrs. Kimble* in that it involves a family and much of the story is set in the past. It's another intimate novel, showing the insides of people's lives. That's what interests me as a writer. Private stories, what people think and do and say when they think no one is watching.

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Introduction

Deftly exploring the poignant landscape of longing, *Mrs. Kimble* traces the lives of three women who marry the same opportunistic man, a chameleon named Ken Kimble. He seduces each of them with sensitivity and generosity, and with his obsessively perfected physique. But marriage reveals Ken's true persona—elusive, workaholic, and hungry for extramarital affairs. All three of his wives are sustained by the hope that he will once again become the hero they fell in love with. For Ken's children, the reality of their father's absence is at once devastating and indelible. And for Ken himself, the price of maintaining illusions appears to be negligible.

Spanning four decades in the life of a tantalizingly unknowable man, *Mrs. Kimble* vividly portrays the pain of unequal affections. In a voice that is neither maudlin nor sentimental, Jennifer Haigh has crafted a debut novel that captures journeys of the heart in a wholly original way. We hope that the following questions will enhance your discussion of this provocative triumph in fiction.

Discussion Topics

1. Consider the similarities and differences among Birdie, Joan, and Dinah. Is there a common thread that attracts Ken to each of them.
2. Joan and Dinah have physical traits that cause them to feel self-conscious and prone to rejection. Do you consider Birdie's vulnerabilities to be equally physical in nature, or are they purely emotional?
3. What motivates Ken? In your opinion, what enables him to so suddenly shift from being charming to vapid? To what do you attribute his compulsive dishonesty?
4. The novel's title reflects the tradition of taking a husband's surname after marriage. All of Ken's wives change their last names and become Mrs. Kimble. What does this indicate about the tradition, gender, power, and identity in Ken's marriages?

5. Birdie appears in all three parts of the novel. What were your initial impressions of her? Did your opinion of her shift as her life story unfolded?
6. American society experienced significant changes between the 1960s and the 1990s. Did this appear to affect Ken's various marriages, or was his behavior consistent across the mores of all decades?
7. How might Birdie's life have been different had her father not interfered with her attraction to Curtis Mabry? What is the effect of the Mabry family's presence in the novel?
8. Though the novel's characters are for the most part indifferent to spirituality, religion provides a frequent backdrop in *Mrs. Kimble*. What is the significance of Ken's Bible school past? How did you react when he convinced Joan of his Jewish heritage?
9. Do you believe that Ken's abandonment of Birdie was the sole cause of her emotional breakdown? How might her life have played out if he hadn't left her?
10. How does Ken's departure affect his children's attitude toward love? Do their relationships reflect or defy their parents' example?
11. Jennifer Haigh builds the storyline of *Mrs. Kimble* around brief scenes rather than lengthy, uninterrupted chapters. What is the effect of this technique?
12. Ken is not the only predatory man in the novel; Birdie is exploited by the mechanic she meets as a waitress, for example. Do the novel's characterizations of men and women match your own experience with the opposite sex?
13. With which of Ken's wives were you most able to relate? How would you have responded in each of their situations?
14. Though Ken is the most obviously secretive character in the novel, all of his wives possess a certain degree of secrecy and denial. Do you believe that it's possible to lead a completely honest life—including self honesty?
15. Ken is an enigma, yet his character is drawn in rich detail. Discuss the significance of his vanity, his attraction to younger women, and his apparent inability to love or show genuine affection. What is the relevance of his conservative childhood, particularly the death of his brother?
16. Food is mentioned throughout the novel, including Charlie's perpetual hunger as a child; Birdie's botched attempts to buy groceries; Ken's aversion to seafood, which causes Joan to tailor her menus; and Dinah's Thanksgiving reunion and culinary expertise. Discuss some of your most meaningful memories regarding food.

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17. What makes Ken's cause of death particularly ironic and fitting?
 18. While there are clearly three Mrs. Kimbles, are there also three Mr. Kimbles? Does each wife represent a separate identity for Ken?
 19. What variations on love (parental, romantic, erotic) are presented in *Mrs. Kimble*? Which characters appear to experience the most authentic forms of love?
 20. 20. The novel closes with Ken's children brought together by Dinah. Charlie embraces his role as Brendan's big brother and father figure. What do you predict for the family after Ken's death?

The man died alone

, in a baby blue Eldorado on Route A1A, waiting for the drawbridge to be lowered. As his heart seized, his foot lifted off the brake; the car crept forward and nudged the bumper of a lawn service truck. The driver of the truck radioed his office and waited for the ambulance to arrive. By the time it came, the man was already dead.

He had lived alone in a furnished apartment on Largo Boulevard with a sunny terrace and a view of the ocean; in the five months he'd lived there, no one in the building had noticed any visitors. In his apartment police found no books, no photos or personal correspondence, just recent newspapers and copies of the *Broward County Real Estate Guide*, a free publication distributed in boxes on the beach. In the bathroom were several bottles of pills, all unlabeled; according to the coroner, they were medications to lower blood pressure and cholesterol, slow a racing heart. The man had owned a dozen fine suits and three pairs of expensive running shoes. A neighbor said he'd risen at dawn each day to run on the beach. On the table next to his bed was a gold wedding band.

He'd been seen eating breakfast each morning at a coffee shop down the street—the same thing every day, black coffee and toast. He sat alone at the counter reading newspapers: a local daily, the *Miami Herald*, and the *Washington Post*.

How he spent the rest of the day, nobody knew. He was seen twice at a neighborhood drugstore, buying vitamins. He paid his rent with a personal check; five months ago he'd opened an account at First Florida bank. An associate at a local Cadillac dealership remembered selling him the car. He would remember it forever. The man had handed him sixty thousand dollars in cash.

He'd died on a Friday night, the beginning of the Memorial Day weekend. The Department of Motor Vehicles would be closed until Tuesday; pulling the man's driving record might have taken days, but the sheriff knew someone at the DMV. The man's Florida license was brand new; no address had been recorded from the Virginia one he'd surrendered. The Virginia DMV had an address on file but no phone number.

The body waited in the county morgue. Plaque in its arteries, an enlarged heart starved of blood. If no relatives were located, it would be buried in the municipal cemetery at the man's own expense. His checking account at First Florida contained half a million dollars.

The police kept trying.

Virginia
1969

Charlie's mother sat cross-legged on the living room floor, her nightgown pulled over her knees, a spill of photographs scattered across the faded carpet. Years later he would remember the sound of the scissors' blades gnawing into the glossy paper, his little sister Jody wailing in the background, the determined look on their mother's face.

She had been drinking; her teeth were stained blue from the wine. She worked methodically, the tip of her tongue peeping out the corner of her mouth. The defaced photos she stacked in a neat pile: Christmases, family picnics, Fourth of July, each with a jagged oval where his father's face had been. One by one she slid the photos back into their frames. She climbed unsteadily to her feet and placed the frames back on the mantelpiece, the sideboard table, the naked hooks dotting the cracked plaster wall.

"Better," she said under her breath. She took Jody by the hand and led her into the kitchen. Charlie dropped to his knees and picked through the pile of trash on the floor. He made a pile of his father's heads, some smiling, some wearing a cap or sunglasses. He filled his pockets with the tiny heads and scabbled out the back door.

His father was there and then he wasn't. A long time ago he'd taken them to church. Charlie could remember being lifted onto the hard pew, the large freckled hand covering his entire back. He remembered playing with the gold watchband peeking out from under his father's sleeve, and the red imprint it left on the skin underneath.

His father had a special way of eating. He rolled back the cuffs of his shirt, then buttered two slices of bread and placed them on either side of the plate. Finally he mixed all his food into a big pile—peas, roast, mashed potatoes—and ate loudly, the whole meal in a few minutes. Charlie had tried mixing his own food together, but found himself unable to eat it; the foods disgusted him once they touched, and his mother got mad at the mess on his plate.

His father made pancakes, and sucked peppermints, and whistled when he drove them in the car. On the floor of his closet, he kept a coffee can full of change. Each night lying in bed, Charlie would wait for the sound of his father emptying his pockets into the can, nickels and dimes landing with recognizable sounds, some tinny, some dry and dusty. It was always the last thing that happened. Once he heard the coins fall, Charlie would go to sleep.

Birdie was unwell. It was mid-morning when she opened her eyes, the room filled with sunlight. She rolled over and felt a sharp pain over her right eye. The other side of the bed was still made, the pillow tucked neatly under the chenille spread. She had remained a considerate sleeper, as if her sleeping self hadn't yet figured out that the whole bed was hers alone.

She lay there a moment, blinking. She had been dreaming of her childhood. In the dream she was small, younger than Charlie; she and Curtis Mabry, the housekeeper's son, had hidden in the laundry hampers. "You nearly give me a heart attack," said the housekeeper when she discovered them. "You're lucky I don't tell your mother."

Through the thin walls she heard movement, the bright tinkling music of morning cartoons. She lifted herself out of bed, her nylon nightgown clinging to her back. In the living room the children looked up from the television.

"Mummy," Jody squealed, springing off the couch and running to hug her leg. She wore shortie pajamas, printed with blue daisies. Birdie wondered for a moment who'd dressed the child for bed. She couldn't remember doing it herself.

"Can I go outside?" said Charlie. He lay sprawled on the rug, too close to the television.

"May I go outside *please*," she corrected him. "Yes, you may."

He scrambled to his feet, already in socks and sneakers. The screen door spanked shut behind him. Birdie unwrapped Jody's small arms from her leg. "Let me get you some breakfast," she said. The children seemed to lie in wait for her, to ambush her the moment she crawled out of bed, full of energy and raging needs. At such times it could be altogether too much—her stomach squeezed, the sign of a rough morning ahead—for one person.

She took Jody into the kitchen. It was a point of pride for Birdie: her kitchen was always immaculate. The room simply wasn't used. She hadn't cooked in weeks, hadn't shopped except for brief trips to Beckwith's corner store, to buy wine and overpriced loaves of bread.

She found the box in the cupboard and poured the cereal into Jody's plastic bowl, decorated with pictures of a cartoon cat. She opened the refrigerator and a sour smell floated into the kitchen. The milk had spoiled.

"Oops," she said, smiling brightly. She ought to pour it down the drain, but the very thought of sour milk turned her stomach; she left the carton where it was. She eyed the wine bottle corked with a paper napkin. Beside it an unopened bottle, the one she hadn't got to last night. She closed the door.

"Looks like it's toast for us," she said. She put two slices of bread in the toaster. She hadn't finished the bottle, so why did she feel so wretched? On Sunday night she'd had two full bottles, and not so much as a headache when she woke the next morning.

The toast popped, the sound a jolt to her heart. Perhaps she hadn't overindulged, just consumed unwisely. She'd already learned that red wine hit her hardest, that a small meal—toast or crackers—cushioned the stomach and allowed her to drink more. Beyond that, the workings of alcohol were still a mystery. It seemed to hit her harder at certain times in her monthly cycle; why, she couldn't

imagine. She wondered if this were true for other women. She had no one to ask. Her mother was dead, and anyway had never touched anything stronger than lemonade. Her father's new wife probably did drink, but Birdie couldn't imagine talking to Helen about this or anything else.

"Butter?" Jody asked.

"Sorry, button." Birdie spread the bread with grape jelly and thought of the wine.

She would have been married eight years that Tuesday.

THEIR HOUSE sat back to back with the Raskins' house; a tall hedge marked the border between the two yards. Charlie stepped through a bare spot in the hedge and cut through the Raskins' backyard; then he crossed the street to the Hogans'. Mr. Hogan had already left for work. A single light burned in the kitchen window. Out back the Hogans' dog, Queenie, snored in her pen. Next door the Fleurys' German shepherd barked wildly—he barked at anything that moved—but Queenie didn't even stir. She was an old, fat dog, collie and something else. A heavy chain hung from her collar. Charlie wondered why the Hogans bothered. He couldn't imagine Queenie going anywhere.

He tiptoed toward the pen, where Queenie's bowl was filled with kibble. The nuggets were still crunchy. Later in the day they would be soft from sitting out in the heat. He filled his pockets with the kibble. He felt bad stealing from the Hogans, but Queenie was fat and lazy. Anyone could see she had too much food already.

From the Hogans' he went through the Arnetts' yard and into the woods. The path ran along a shallow stream. Earlier that spring a gang of older boys had built a dam there. He'd been watching the dam for weeks to see if more mud and sticks and rocks were being added. One of the gang, a mean, freckled boy named Jeffrey, had moved away; Charlie had seen the truck drive up to Jeffrey's house at the bottom of the hill. Since then the boys had neglected the dam. Charlie hoped that if he watched and waited long enough, they would forget the dam completely and it would be his.

He knew about moving. When he was little they'd moved to Richmond from Missouri. He remembered the kitchen full of boxes, his mother wrapping dishes in layers of newspaper. His father had driven the truck. Charlie had sat next to him on a box of books.

There had been no truck when his father went away, no boxes of dishes and newspaper that Charlie saw. He wasn't there when his father left. He was riding the bus to Pappy's house with Mama and Jody. When they came back his father was gone. Charlie was six then, had since turned seven. His father hadn't come back for his birthday. He hadn't come back at all.

He followed the creek upstream, to where six big rocks lay end to end, making a bridge across the stream. If he was careful he could cross without getting his sneakers wet. He'd always wondered if somebody had made the bridge, carried the heavy rocks to the middle of the stream, or if they'd simply been there forever.

On the other side he ran downstream to where the ground got swampy under his feet. He crossed the swamp to the empty house—old, falling down, its windows covered with boards. Under the front

porch lived a mother dog and her four puppies. He'd found the puppies when they were just born, silky, mouselike things with pinkish eyes and small, slick heads, snuggled in close to their mother's belly. He visited them every day.

He ran around to the front of the house. "Here, boys," he called softly. The black puppy, the friendliest one and Charlie's favorite, came first.

He reached into his pocket for a piece of kibble. The puppy came to him and mouthed it, its moist tongue sliding over his palm.

THE THING to do was make a list. In the past Birdie would write down everything: milk, hamburger meat, potatoes. Her husband would drive her to the A&P and walk down the aisles with her and they would talk about the prices of things; he'd lived on a farm as a boy and knew what was in season. Afterward he'd carry the bags into the house and place cans and boxes on the shelves; she'd separate the Green Stamps the cashier had given her and paste them into books. She had saved Green Stamps for years, redeemed them for a carpet sweeper, an egg timer she kept by the stove.

She'd kept busy then. She'd cooked his breakfast. *Eggs*, she wrote carefully. *Bacon*. She'd read to the children and made their lunches. *Cheese slices*. *Tomato soup*. While the baby slept she would dust or sweep or wash clothes. *Oxydol*. *Clorox bleach*. Every few days she'd wash two dozen diapers; the new disposables were too expensive, her husband said. After the laundry she'd start dinner. It seemed impossible, now, that she'd ever done so many things in a day.

Birdie looked at her list, written in wavy letters on the back of an envelope. The ink had begun to smear onto her sweaty hands. The complexity of the plan overwhelmed her: the driving across town, the finding of things in the bright aisles, the carrying of heavy bags from carport to kitchen. She sat for a moment with her head in her hands, her eyes leaking tears.

Jody appeared in the doorway. "Whata matter, Mummy?"

Birdie rubbed her eyes. "Nothing, button."

"What did you got on your face?"

Birdie peered at her reflection in the toaster. Her eyes seemed too far apart, her face round and flat as a dinner plate. There were splotches of bright blue around the eyes and mouth. She rubbed her face with sweaty fingers. Her hands were spotted blue, as with some rare disease.

"It must be this ink pen." She got to her feet and tossed the pen in the trash. She noticed then that Jody wore nothing but a diaper, and was suddenly ashamed. What kind of mother was she, letting her child run around the house half naked? What if someone should come to the door? What if—she tried to stop the thought, but couldn't—he should come back?

"Let's get some clothes on you." She drained her glass and passed through the living room. Charlie had come back and lay sprawled before the television. The children's room was a true disaster: toys scattered across the floor, tiny socks and underpants, small muddy footprints on the

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