

## A READING GROUP GUIDE TO *WIFE IN THE NORTH*

### *Discussion Questions:*

1. Judith concedes to move out of London to accommodate her husband's desire to live in the country, yet he continues to commute to the city to work while she remains at home. At the end of the day, do you consider this a fair trade? Why or why not?
2. "Wifey" is a classic city-mouse in the country. How does her experience in the country change her relationship to the city? How well does she adapt to her new surroundings?
3. As the mother of three young children, and the daughter of aging parents, Judith admits to not knowing whether to run for her four-year-old or to remain with her hesitant mother for fear that she may trip. How does this "damned if you do, damned if you don't" experience motivate Judith? How accurately do you think it represents the experiences of women who have children at a later age?

4. What do you see as Judith O'Reilly's primary concern in life? How do her priorities reflect, or differ, from your own?
5. Does the country make Judith become more of an adult? Why or why not?
6. Late in the book, we learn that Judith's first child was stillborn. How do you think this experience has shaped her relationship to her three children? To her idea of family? Does Judith consider her friends more akin to family than most people?
7. After Judith writes in her blog about her son's experience of being bullied in school, she's ostracized by some members of the school community. What's your understanding of their reaction? Was she out of line to write publicly about the events? Why or why not?
8. Judith sees blogging as a sort of online diary accessible to any and all. Do you agree? How well do you feel you know the author by the end of the book?
9. What are the potential ramifications of blogging about family life?
10. At the end of the book, Judith admits that she has decided to stay in Northumberland. Did her decision surprise you? Why or why not?

### *A Conversation with the Author:*

*Obviously the benefits of Northumberland, in the end, outweighed those of London. What were your main criteria for determining whether or not you stayed on?*

I warmed to Northumberland. I regard it as a place of immense beauty and power. I am also aware that I have made friends and am part of a community in a way that was not possible for me in London. If I were on my own I would be living in London, but I am married and have children and any decision is made for all of us. My children love it, my husband loves it, we have more space for my parents, and at the moment, it fits.

*In what ways does Northumberland feel more like a home to you than London? In what ways does it not?*

In London, although I had old friends scattered across the city, I did not have a network of friends living close by which I do have in Northumberland. People “drop by”—no one ever “dropped by” in London. Also, it is nice to have space in my home, for the children to do their homework on the kitchen table and for them to have a secret den in our jungle of a garden. Space is at a premium in London because of high city costs.

I have my doubts though whether we will ever really belong. You decide whether you can live with being on the outside of things. I have decided we can.

*You have claimed that starting a blog was good for your mental and emotional health. With a cache of dedicated readers who visit your blog, have your feelings about the benefits of blogging changed?*

I recommend blogging to anyone. It is a great way of reaching out to people you would never otherwise get the chance to meet. When there are problems, readers take time out to offer support and that is a great resource to have. It is also a fantastic way to keep memories, share an interest, or be creative. Don't do it for a book deal though, do it because it feels good. If you get a book deal that's a bonus.

*How has writing a memoir changed the way that you think about your life? About the passage of time? Did you feel that the time in Northumberland passed more slowly than in London? More quickly?*

I did not realize how much I had taken on, until I wrote about it. When I saw it in black and white—leaving a city I loved, moving three times, renovating a house, having a baby, postnatal depression, my husband being away part of the year—the surprise was that I did not go completely round the bend. As for time—I do believe that even when it is very grim, it helps if you can hold onto the thought “this too shall pass.” I did think time in Northumberland passed slowly until I looked at the children and realised that they were sneaking up on me height-wise. I reckon by eleven, the boys will be taller than I am and then what will I do?

*Do you feel that your relationship with your husband suffered in the move, or blossomed?*

It suffered for a while I would say. It was a testing time for our marriage but we got through it and managed to keep laughing. That is what happens in marriage sometimes—the trick is to talk about what is going on, or if he isn't around to hear what you have to say, write a book and give him a copy. That can also work.

*When you mention your “former life” as a reporter who rubbed elbows with Important People, you come off as gently nostalgic. How much do you miss that kind of life? Would you trade it for what you have now? How much has having children changed the way you think about work? Success?*

I do miss being at the heart of things. I miss it when there is a big story on TV and I'm not ringing people up finding out what's behind the headlines. I do not miss schmoozing—I miss knowing what is really going on and occasionally landing a good story. I could not trade what I have now though, because I found it impossible to put in the hours and perform at the level I wanted to, and still see enough of the boys. I have been there, done that—that has to be good enough. What I am trying to do, what a lot of women out there are trying to do, is find a way to be a mother at the same time as earning some money and keeping myself sane. If you stay at home and that works for you and your family—that is great. There is no one way to do these things—each of us has to find a way that works and if it stops working, find another way. Let's not judge each other. Children did change the way I thought about work. I have tried not working, working full-time, working part-time in an office, working at home part-time, working at home full-time. Whatever you do, you ask

yourself “Am I doing the wrong thing?” There came a moment when I had to let go of “career”—when I stopped being a career girl and became a working mother. We do the best we can.

*Have you found a suitable hairdresser in Northumberland?*

No.

(Can you see me?)

For more information about *Wife in the North* or other PublicAffairs books, visit us on the web at [www.publicaffairsbooks.com](http://www.publicaffairsbooks.com).