

The Condition

by Jennifer Haigh

About the Book

The Condition tells the story of the McKotches, a proper New England family that comes apart during one fateful summer. The year is 1976, and the family, Frank McKotch, an eminent scientist; his pedigreed wife, Paulette; and their three beautiful children has embarked on its annual vacation at the Captain's House, the grand old family retreat on Cape Cod. One day on the beach, Frank is struck by an image he cannot forget: his thirteen-year-old daughter, Gwen, strangely infantile in her child-sized bikini, standing a full head shorter than her younger cousin Charlotte. At that moment he knows a truth that he can never again unknown something is terribly wrong with his only daughter. The McKotch family will never be the same.

Twenty years after Gwen's diagnosis with Turner's syndrome, a genetic condition that has prevented her from maturing, trapping her forever in the body of a child, all five family members are still dealing with the fallout. Each believes himself crippled by some secret pathology; each feels responsible for the family's demise. Frank and Paulette are acrimoniously divorced. Billy, the eldest son, is dutiful but distant, a handsome Manhattan cardiologist with a life built on compromise. His brother, Scott, awakens from a pot-addled adolescence to a soul-killing job, a regrettable marriage, and a vinyl-sided tract house in the suburbs. And Gwen is silent and emotionally aloof, a bright, accomplished woman who spurns any interaction with those around her. She makes peace with the hermetic life she's constructed until, well into her thirties, she falls in love for the first time. And suddenly, once again, the family's world is tilted on its axis.

Praise for the Book

"[A] rich, enjoyable third novel. . . . Haigh sets many balls in motion . . . [and] the McKotch clan evolves believably, and satisfyingly."

— **People (People Pick)**

"THE CONDITION is something rare. . . . Ms. Haigh has a great gift for telling interwoven family stories and doing justice to all the different perspectives they present. . . . A remarkable accomplishment."

— **Janet Maslin, New York Times Book Review**

Courtesy of Harpercollins

About the Author

Biography Resource Center

Jennifer Haigh
1968-

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Writings

- *Mrs. Kimble* (novel), William Morrow (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Baker Towers* (novel), William Morrow (New York, NY), 2005.

Contributor to periodicals, including articles and short stories to *Good Housekeeping*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Idaho Review*, *Global City Review*, *Men's Health*, and *Cosmopolitan*.

Writer. Worked as an editor at *Self* magazine; also taught yoga.

Fulbright teaching fellowship; James A. Michener fellowship, 2002; Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, distinguished first book of fiction, 2004, for *Mrs. Kimble*.

Born 1968, in PA. **Education:** Dickinson College, graduated, 1990; University of Iowa, M.F.A., 2002. **Addresses:** Home: Hull, MA. Agent: Dorian Karchmar, Lowenstein-Yost Associates, 121 W. 27th St., Ste. 601, New York, NY 10001.

Sidelights

Jennifer Haigh's debut novel, *Mrs. Kimble*, is actually about the lives of three Mrs. Kimbles, all of whom at some point in time are married to "serial husband" Ken Kimble. Karma Sawka reviewed the novel for *Mostly Fiction*, saying that "each of the women that Ken Kimble develops relationships with has such human needs--love, acceptance, companionship--and he is so charming. The sad ways in which he deceives them are rendered with compassion and realism by Ms. **Haigh**. I felt for these women, whose lives were so altered by someone they believe truly loved them, but someone the reader knows will betray each of them as the story unfolds."

On the *Baker Books* Web site, Haigh said that the three women "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." Haigh called her novel "a meditation on marriage: why women hunger for it, what we're willing to sacrifice in order to have it."

The story opens with first-wife Birdie Bell, already abandoned, in a deep depression and succumbing to alcoholism. In the early 1960s, Birdie dropped out of Bible college to marry Ken, the choir director, fourteen years her senior. Ken was fired and the couple moved to Virginia, where he had been offered another job. After eight years of marriage, he left Birdie and their two children, Charlie and Jody, for another young student, Moira Snell. Birdie, who doesn't drive and has spent all of her married life at home, is unable to cope, and while she finds relief in a wine bottle, her children survive on peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches.

Ken and Moira go to Florida, where he meets her parents, who are his age, and their friend, Joan, a never-married Jewish New York journalist and a breast-cancer survivor who is living at the estate of her recently deceased father. Joan invites Ken to stay at her place, and seeing an opportunity, Ken lies to her, telling her that his mother was Jewish, and he is soon married to Joan and working in the family real estate business.

Ten years later, Ken is a wealthy widower when he meets Dinah, a Washington, DC, chef who had been his children's babysitter years ago in Richmond. Dinah's face is disfigured by a large birthmark that Ken, with all his resources, is able to have removed, and the now gray-haired businessman marries the beautiful young blond, who then abandons her own career, and they have a son. After fifteen years of marriage, Dinah begins to realize who her husband really is when his business dealings come into question.

Curled Up with a Good Book contributor Stephanie Perry commented that Haigh's writing "is solid and meaty, nicely portraying (though not explaining) the conflicting emotions that plague the three Mrs. Kimbles. The dialogue is convincing and natural, particularly that of Charlie, who learns to be the man of the house at a young age, and never sheds his resentment at being forced into the role by his father's absence. Although logic dictates that at least two of the three marriages don't last, the storytelling is nuanced and rich enough to keep us in suspense, waiting each time for the other marital shoe to drop."

A *Kirkus Reviews* writer remarked that Haigh's "measured prose and care for detail show a promising talent." Phoebe Kate Foster reviewed the novel for *Pop Matters*, writing that "on the surface, it might be easily dismissed as an all-too-familiar cautionary account of what happens when women depend too much on men to validate them and use them to fill in the blanks in their psyches much as one fills in empty spaces in a day planner. The book does work, to some extent, at this level. ... But there is a great deal more going on here than a refresher course in Feminist Principles 101. Haigh's deft hand at sculpting her female characters leaves no room for easy stereotypes and tidily glib plot summaries. Like a surgeon, she cuts to the bone of what makes love between two people such an elusive, baffling, frustrating, contradictory, confounding sort of thing."

Baker Towers is the story of a family rooted in the coal country of western Pennsylvania. In the mining town of Bakerton, the widow Rose Novak raises her son and four daughters in poverty in the years following World War II. Her son manages to escape Bakerton for the supposedly better city life of Philadelphia, two daughters leave briefly but return, and at least one daughter never leaves, tied to the community by the bonds of family and friends. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor called *Baker Towers* "almost mythic in its ambition ... and thoroughly satisfying." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer observed that, in *Baker Towers*, Haigh continues to focus on "the hardships of women's lives" and "writes convincingly of family and smalltown relations."

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- *Book*, March-April, 2003, Susan Tekulve, review of *Mrs. Kimble*, p. 74.
- *Booklist*, November 15, 2002, Kristine Huntley, review of *Mrs. Kimble*, p. 548.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, November 15, 2002, review of *Mrs. Kimble*, p. 1643; September 15, 2004, review of *Baker Towers*, p. 883.
- *Library Journal*, January, 2003, Joanna M. Burkhardt, review of *Mrs. Kimble*, p. 154.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 17, 2003, review of *Mrs. Kimble*, p. 58; November 22, 2004, review of *Baker Towers*, p. 38.

Online

- *Baker Books Web Site*, <http://bakerbooks.net/> (October 15, 2003), "A Note from Author Jennifer Haigh."
- *Book Page*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (February, 2003), Anne Morris, review of *Mrs. Kimble*.
- *BookReporter*, <http://www.bookreporter.com/> (October 15, 2003), Shannon Bloomstran, review of *Mrs. Kimble*.
- *Curled Up with a Good Book*, <http://www.curledup.com/> (October 15, 2003), Stephanie Perry, review of *Mrs. Kimble*.
- *Dickinson*, <http://www.dickinson.edu/magazine/> (March 22, 2004), Jillian Cohan, feature on Jennifer Haigh.
- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/> (February 20, 2003), Karma Sawka, review of *Mrs. Kimble*.
- *NewYorkMetro*, <http://www.newyorkmetro.com/> (October 15, 2003), John Homans, review of *Mrs. Kimble*.
- *Pop Matters*, <http://www.popmatters.com/> (April 2, 2003), Phoebe Kate Foster, review of *Mrs. Kimble*.*

Author Interview

Q: What sparked the idea for *The Condition*? Was it a character, a scene, or something else?

A: This is a hard question to answer—I spent years writing this book, and I'm not altogether sure what came first. It may well have been that house on the Cape.

Q: *The Condition* is the first of your three novels to use Massachusetts as its primary backdrop. What was it about this story that prompted you to use your home terrain as a setting?

A: Like everything I write, *The Condition* is inextricably tied to its setting. Paulette comes from a particular kind of Massachusetts family—obsessed with its ancestors, proud of its long history, prone to retelling the family stories again and again. You don't find people like the Drews in, say, Nevada. Frank isn't from this kind of family—he's transplanted into one, which is itself interesting—but he's part of the high-powered, competitive scientific world that centers around Harvard and MIT. And of course, growing up where they do affects the kinds of experiences their children have—the schools they attend, the friends they make—all of which are quite formative. Like everyone else in the world, the McKotches people are products of their environment. There's nothing accidental about it.

Q: Turner's syndrome, as you explain in the novel, is a rare genetic disorder. How did you find out about it, and why did you decide on this condition for Gwen?

A: I have known girls and women with Turner's; I've talked with physicians who address it, and I've read about it in the medical literature. According to the NIH, which has an Office of Rare Diseases, a "rare" condition affects fewer than 200,000 people in the United States. There are about 108,000 girls and women with Turner's.

As a novelist, I find Turner's fascinating. At one point in the story, Paulette muses, "A woman is her body," and I believe this is true: in our culture, a woman's appearance has everything to do with how she is perceived and treated, the opportunities that come to her, her career and personal relationships, the way she views herself. It's not the only factor that determines how her life turns out, but it's disproportionately significant. And yet nobody deserves to be beautiful, or plain, or short or tall or whatever; it's a genetic lottery, and we get what we get. I am struck by the arbitrariness of it all, and the profound unfairness. It's worth writing about.

Q: From a writer's perspective, what do you find intriguing about multi-generational tales like *The Condition* and your previous novel *Baker Towers*?

A: I am often asked why I keep writing family stories. In fact, every story is a family story: we all come from somewhere, and it's impossible to write well-developed characters without giving a great deal of thought to their childhood environments, their early experiences, whose genetic material they're carrying around. Novels are all about causality—how one thing leads to another. Characters' choices have consequences that affect the next generation, and even the next. It's very satisfying to play out those consequences over many years.

Q: In what ways do the alternating perspectives enhance the story? Was there one character in particular that you enjoyed writing?

A: Like my earlier novels, *The Condition* is a *Rashomon*-like story: no one character knows the whole story, and the fascination lies in the discrepancies between the different characters' versions of events. For example, why did Frank and Paulette get divorced? Each of the McKotches would answer that question differently—and each answer reveals a great deal about the character himself.

I enjoyed writing all these characters, but I have a special fondness for Scott, who reminds me of the boys I dated in college. He makes me laugh.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the book's title. What else might it refer to other than Gwen's Turner's syndrome?
2. In what ways does Gwen's condition reverberate throughout the McKotch family? What do Frank and Paulette's differing opinions about how to treat Gwen's condition reveal about their personalities and also about their relationship?
3. Paulette and Frank's marriage was rife with misunderstandings on both sides. Was one person more to blame than the other for their break-up? Of the two, who did you find to be more sympathetic? Why does Billy blame his father for the divorce?
4. What was your impression of Paulette? Do you suppose the author meant for her to be a likeable character?
5. Discuss Paulette's relationship with Donald and her infatuation with Gil Pyle. What did Paulette find in her relationship with Donald that she did not with Frank?
6. Frank often compares his working-class background in a Pennsylvania mining town with Paulette's pedigreed family, musing that everything comes down to upbringing. How does his children's upbringing affect the paths they take in life? Was Frank a bad father, as Paulette seemed to believe?
7. On the surface the three McKotch children are extremely different. In what ways, if any, are they alike?
8. Why does Gwen distance herself from her family both physically and emotionally? Why does she ultimately decide to forgive Rico and Scott but not her mother?
9. Do you agree with Paulette's decision to send Scott to St. Raphael to bring Gwen home? Why is it so difficult for Paulette to believe that a man might be attracted to Gwen? Is she merely being a protective mother?
10. Gwen ends up living on St. Raphael, worlds away from her isolated life in Pittsburgh and Concord before that. What does she find on the Caribbean island that she hasn't anywhere else? Why does she reconcile with Rico?
11. What prompts Billy to finally reveal to his family that he's gay? How do Paulette and Frank each react to the news?
12. By the time the family reconvenes at the Captain's House, what realizations has Scott come to about his life—professionally and romantically, as well as his role as a father? In what ways have the others changed by the time of the reunion?

13. Sense of place is an important theme in *The Condition*. How do the opening scenes at the Captain's House set the tone for the rest of the novel? What do the main characters' living spaces, from Paulette's 200-year-old Concord house to Billy's meticulously decorated New York City apartment, reveal about them?

14. What do you suppose the future holds for the five members of the McKotch family?

15. Jennifer Haigh unfolds the narrative from the alternating perspectives of Frank, Paulette, and their three children. In what ways did this enhance your reading of the story?

16. Overall, what are your thoughts about the way the author presents the McKotches? Did you find their story to be a realistic and believable one?

17. If you have read Jennifer Haigh's previous novels, *Baker Towers* and *Mrs. Kimble*, discuss the similarities and differences between those two books and *The Condition*.

Courtesy of Harpercollins