

Penelope Mortimer (1918–1999), herself a mother of six and wife to screenwriter John Mortimer, was a biographer, novelist, and journalist, whose work regularly appeared in *The New Yorker*. Her many books include *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*, *Queen Mother*, and *The Handyman*. Her autobiography, *About Time*, won the Whitbread Prize. *The Pumpkin Eater* was made into a film starring Anne Bancroft and Peter Finch and with a Harold Pinter screenplay.

Daphne Merkin is a critic, novelist, and regular contributor to *The New York Times Book Review*. She is currently at work on a cultural and personal memoir of depression, *Melancholy Bay*.

THE PUMPKIN EATER

By Penelope Mortimer
Introduction by Daphne Merkin

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“A subtle, fascinating, unhackneyed novel... in touch with human realities and frailties, unsentimental and amused... so moving, so funny, so desperate, so alive... a fine book, and one to be greatly enjoyed.” —Elizabeth Janeway, *The New York Times*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Mrs. Armitage, the psychologically rich protagonist of *The Pumpkin Eater*, is a woman who has had her fair share of luck in the world: her husband is a wealthy screenwriter, so she is able to enjoy both the glamour of hobnobbing with movie stars and the peace of mind that comes from knowing her family can live in comfort. As her own husband, Jake, says, “She’s got everything any woman could want—clothes, a car, servants, she’s attractive.” Soon, she’ll even have her dream home—a glass tower, built to her family’s specifications, in the countryside where she first met Jake.

But despite all this, Mrs. Armitage isn’t happy, and it is from her own complicated viewpoint that the story of *The Pumpkin Eater* is told. She relates her thoughts, her dreams, her quotidian interactions with her family and her analyst, her worries, and reminiscences from her past—all in a striking, intricate, and slightly surreal pastiche. Penelope Mortimer, whose own life story bears many similarities to that of her protagonist, has created in Mrs. Armitage something of an unlikely feminist figure: powerless to change her situation, but too sharp not to notice her own ennui. Mrs. Armitage’s considerable intelligence and constant examination of her own life involve the reader intimately in her story, inviting a unique kind of sympathy for a woman in crisis.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Like Mrs. Armitage, Penelope Mortimer had a large family (she had six children) and married a screenwriter who was unfaithful. She, too, had an abortion just after finding out her husband had impregnated another woman. How much does Mortimer’s biography matter? Does it change your understanding of the novel to know that many of its details are based on its creator’s life?
2. The reader never learns Mrs. Armitage’s first name. Why do you think Penelope Mortimer chooses not to name her protagonist?
3. On the second page of the novel, Mrs. Armitage frankly informs her analyst, “Jake is rich. He makes about £50,000 a year, I suppose you’d call that rich” [p. 10]. Later, she cries in the linen section of a department store—not because she can’t afford something, but because she is “looking for something to buy, but there is nothing to buy” [p. 47]. What role does class play in the novel? Is Mrs. Armitage’s discontent tied up with her station in life, or does the unsolicited letter from Meg Evans suggest it’s just a symptom of mid-century motherhood [p. 147]?

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The True Deceiver, Tove Jansson

(introduction by Ali Smith)

Lolly Willowes, Sylvia Townsend

Warner (introduction by Alison Lurie)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Penelope Mortimer, *About Time*

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

Margaret Atwood,
The Edible Woman

Ayelet Waldman, *Bad Mother*

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

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4. Chapter 2 provides an ironic juxtaposition when Jake and Mrs. Armitage tell their fathers they are going to be married. Both fathers seem to disapprove of the union—because each thinks his child isn't good enough for the other. As the novel goes on, are their opinions justified? Is Jake as unsympathetic and lazy as his father suggests? Is Mrs. Armitage as "feckless" as her father says?
5. Why do you think Mrs. Armitage's previous marriages ended? Consider her ex-husband Giles's treatment of her when she goes to see him near the end of the book [e.g., p. 202]. Does he still love her?
6. Mrs. Armitage refers to the "incessant company of children" [p. 35], and demands "Supposing I told you that I didn't love the children, that I don't give a damn about the children? It might be true, you know" [p. 190]. Does she love her children? What role do they play in her life?
7. How did the stories of Mrs. Armitage's childhood—of Ireen's visit to her home and of her experience with Mr. Simpkin—help to shape her character in your mind? Do you think Mrs. Armitage presented Ireen's character fairly?
8. When you learned Mrs. Armitage was pregnant again, did you anticipate that she would get an abortion? Do you think she would have made the same decision if she'd been independent of Jake's influence? Were you surprised by how frankly the novel addressed the topic?
9. Mrs. Armitage explains that "Jake and life became confused in my mind, and inseparable... He increased monstrously, became the sky, the earth, the enemy, the unknown" [p. 44]. Later, she imagines his thoughts and admits, "It did not occur to me that these were my thoughts, or that his could be more complex" [p. 114]. What are the consequences for Mrs. Armitage of being unable to disassociate her life from the idea of her husband? Has she lost her identity? The specter of the glass tower looms over much of the novel, and when it is finished, "it looked bleak and foolish, like a monument to a disgraced hero" [p. 174]. What do you think the tower might symbolize?
10. Mrs. Armitage is self-aware and self-analytical to a fault: "My mother could be a bitch at times... or perhaps, like me, she was just stupid. It's often hard to tell the difference, even in oneself," she says [p. 84]. Why is she so critical of herself? Do you think her assessment is fair?
11. "I was alone with myself, and we watched each other with steady, cold, inward eyes," Mrs. Armitage says near the end of the novel [p. 215]. How does she handle the relationship between herself as a subject and herself as an observer? Does this change throughout the course of the novel?
12. *The Pumpkin Eater* was published one year before Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and Mrs. Armitage seems at times like a British version of the dissatisfied American housewives Friedan chronicled in that work. (Even Mrs. Armitage's description of women's magazines [p. 88] reads like a humorous gloss on the same themes Friedan broached in her book.) Would you describe *The Pumpkin Eater* as a protofeminist novel? Do you think Mrs. Armitage qualifies as a feminist heroine?
13. At the end of the novel, Mrs. Armitage switches occasionally to the second-person mode of address [p. 218]. To whom is she writing? What do you make of the very last paragraph of the novel, in which she admits to being an unreliable narrator: "Some of these things happened, and some were dreams... they are all real, as I understood reality." Why does this caveat come at the end of the novel rather than the beginning? Does the novel end happily?