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## WISH HER SAFE AT HOME

by Stephen Benatar  
Introduction by John Carey

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"This is a most original and surprising novel, and one difficult to forget: it stays in the mind." —Doris Lessing

"I truly loved this book...such a marvelous work." —Emma Thompson

"The story is simple, the implications are complex. Rachel is one of the great English female characters...She is Scarlett O'Hara, Blanche DuBois, Snow White and Miss Havisham all rolled into one." — *The Times Literary Supplement*

#### ABOUT THIS BOOK

*Wish Her Safe at Home* tells the story of Rachel Waring, whose life is wholly unremarkable—at least at first. Rachel is middle-class and middle-aged, and each night she comes home from a dead-end job to an unpleasant roommate, Sylvia, with whom she shares a mutual, barely veiled distaste.

But Rachel's life is about to take a turn: when she discovers she's inherited a house from an elderly, long-forgotten aunt, she trusts her instincts, quits her job, and moves in without delay. Before long, Rachel is a new woman: she's treating herself to nice clothes; she's taken up gardening and writing; and she's even developing a social life, thanks to the unflinchingly optimistic new outlook she shares with everyone she meets.

Where to draw the line, though, between indulgence and delusion? As the novel goes on, the reader begins to realize that Rachel's total transformation isn't always for the better. Though Stephen Benatar's subtle and piercing psychological drama centers on the objects of everyday life—a house, a painting, a new dress—its story is anything but ordinary. Unnerving, darkly humorous, and written with an impeccable eye for detail, *Wish Her Safe at Home* follows the unfolding of a diseased mind in all its complexity.

#### FOR DISCUSSION

1. Rachel Waring is a complicated character, and she is clearly an unreliable narrator. How would the story be different if told in the third person, rather than in the stream-of-consciousness first-person style the author employs? What if it were told from Roger's perspective, or Sylvia's?
2. Are we meant to identify with Rachel, feel sorry for her, or neither? Do you think the author views his character in a sympathetic light?
3. The stories Rachel tells about her childhood and adolescence shift and change as the novel goes on—for example, she explains near the beginning that "at seventeen I might have gone to Paris...and at the very last moment...I lost my nerve" [p. 12]. Yet, at the end of the novel, she references "the holiday I'd spent in Paris that year I'd turned seventeen," as though she actually had gone after all [p. 244]. Are the stories Rachel relates ever believable? Do you think she ever had the opportunity to go to Paris?

## OSUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Patricia Highsmith, *Editb's Diary*

Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Pierre Boileau and Pierre Ayraud, *The Living and the Dead*

4. There are plenty of warning signs about Rachel's condition that Roger and Celia seem to miss or ignore. How is she able to dupe the couple for so long? Or are they not as innocent as they seem—are they hoping to take advantage of her?
5. When Rachel sets out to write her biography of Horatio Gavin, she admits that “the details might be wrong, for the Reverend Mr. Wallace had in truth mentioned nothing of Horatio's birth, nor had he given me the names and ages of Horatio's parents...” [p. 92]. Since Rachel knows so little about Horatio Gavin's actual life, do the details she inserts into her novel about him actually say more about her than they do about him? What can the reader learn about Rachel by reading what she writes in her book about Gavin?
6. Why does Rachel become so obsessed with Horatio Gavin in the first place?
7. Rachel compares herself throughout the novel to Vivien Leigh, and at the end, she tells the men who follow her onto the bus that she has “always depended on the kindness of strangers” [p. 263]. What is the purpose of these allusions to *A Streetcar Named Desire*? In what ways is Rachel like Blanche DuBois? Do you think she recites this line with some level of self-awareness, since the circumstances under which she says it are so similar to Blanche DuBois's? Or is it an ironic line because Rachel doesn't realize what is happening?
8. Likewise, what about Rachel's comparison of her own life to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—which she follows with, “That was a joke, obviously. The portrait of Dorian Gray was inherently evil whilst both my wardrobe and my world were thrown wide open to the begged-for influence of good” [p. 157]? Is she aware of the irony, or oblivious to it?
9. Rachel seems to believe throughout the novel that she is getting younger and more beautiful—yet what she prides herself on is her charm and intellect. Which set of attributes do you think is more important to her? Does this change as the novel goes on?
10. How does Rachel relate to sex? What is the significance of the childish nicknames she gives to men's genitals: “young Mr. Thingummy” [p. 139] and “his enormous winky” [p. 238]? Though Rachel hasn't had sex, her fantasies are quite detailed—where do you think this level of detail comes from?
11. What do you make of the scene in which Tony almost makes love to Rachel, but doesn't quite get there [pp. 137–139]? When Tony asks her not to tell anyone, is it because he's embarrassed of his own inaction or because he's ashamed of her?
12. What drives Rachel insane? Is it some mysterious property of the house? Her loneliness? Was she mad from the beginning? If she had stayed in the apartment with Sylvia rather than moving into her Aunt Alicia's house, do you think the story would still end the same way?
13. What, in the end, is the significance of the novel's title?

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