



The Truth of the Matter

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Reading Group Guide

1. Agnes's children come back to Washburn after the war because they so longed for home, and Agnes, too, had dreamed of having a full house once again. But when the family is finally settled under one roof after years of being apart, the experience isn't quite what they expected. What does *The Truth of the Matter* say about home? Is home a house, a group of people, a state of mind? Have you ever felt as though you had no home to go to, even if logic tells you otherwise? How do you go about rebuilding a home?
2. The Scofield's, though not the wealthiest family in Washburn, are certainly one of the most closely watched. How does this affect the family — the way Agnes rears her children, the way the children view themselves? It is said that they are "the subjects of a collective pride" in town. Are the town's expectations burdensome to any of the family members?
3. As the Scofield's return to the house, Agnes and her children experience flashes of love and resentment, devotion and bitterness. Where in the story is this friction most apparent? What is the root of these contradictory feelings? Can you love someone and hate him at the same time? In which characters is this clash most evident?
4. What do you make of Agnes Scofield? Is she a selfish character? A noble one? Or does she fall somewhere between those two extremes? Does your view of her change throughout the novel? How does her analysis of herself compare with her children's opinion of her? Why do you think her definition of herself is always so different from the definition others impose on her?
5. When Agnes meets her son Claytor's wife, she thinks that "Lavinia didn't seem to be anything at all like a Scofield." What does it mean to be a Scofield? How do you think Agnes would define Scofieldness? What makes Lavinia so purportedly different from the rest of the family?
6. Family members and outsiders alike constantly make reference to the Scofield's sameness — the brown eyes, the blond hair, the unmistakable temperament and quality of movement. Yet as much as the Scofield's take pride in this unity, they also demonstrate a palpable effort to distinguish themselves from each other. Which characters struggle most with this need to be different? Which struggle least? Why do you think this is so?
7. Throughout the novel, there is the recurring theme of discomfort with the familiar, of feeling like a tourist in one's own life. Where do you see this manifested? What characters embody this sense of unease, and what instances best depict this feeling? Is there anyone in the novel who escapes this sentiment, who serves as a foil to the book's central tension?
8. At one point the author writes of Agnes: "It was what she believed for the time being as opposed to what she knew." How does this explain Agnes? What is this statement getting at? Discuss the significance of this statement with regard to the novel's title, *The Truth of the Matter*. What, to you, is the "truth"? Do you think Agnes would agree or disagree with you?
9. What role does Sam Holloway play in the Scofield's lives? What does he bring to Washburn? What does he represent to Agnes, and why do you think she chooses to open up to him at the end?