



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Gross Misbehavior and Wickedness: A Notorious Divorce in Early Twentieth-Century America

By Jean Elson

1. In Rebecca White Pickering Walker's letter to her son James prior to his marriage, she hinted at some temptation her son was struggling with. What do you think that temptation might have been? How might it have played out during his marriage to Nina?
2. Nina charged her husband James with both adultery and "gross misbehavior and wickedness" with a young woman, Mabel Cochrane, whom he had known in Boston and who later served as the children's governess. What was Nina's evidence for these charges? How did James explain his relationship with Mabel? Do you believe that James and Mabel had a sexual relationship? If not, what might have been the true nature of their relationship? Thinking about the current day, do you think it is appropriate for a married heterosexual man or woman to befriend a single person of the other sex? Why or why not?
3. James's lawyers accused Nina of changing some of Mabel's letters to him. Do you think she might have done that? What evidence would support or disprove the lawyers' charge? Why would Mabel have written in an inappropriately familiar tone to a man who was her employer? What do you think happened to Mabel when she could not be found to testify?
4. James Walker's attorneys claimed that the Walkers' troubles were caused by interference by Nina's mother and sister. Do you believe this is true? Is it possible that Nina never forgave James for being absent when Elizabeth, their first child, was born? Did James's absence make Nina more reliant on her mother and sister, thereby creating future marital problems? How involved should parents and siblings be in their loved ones' marriages? Should people prioritize their loyalty to their spouses over their loyalty to their parents or siblings?
5. Susan Walker Fitzgerald, James' sister, was an outspoken advocate for women's rights. Yet, she did not make a connection between women's fight for more power in society and her sister-in-law's lack of power in her marriage. Conversely, although Nina resented her own lack of power in her marriage, she was vehemently against giving women equal rights in society. Do you find either woman's perspective contradictory? Do you think it might be common for people to hold standards in their personal lives that may differ sharply with their ideals?
6. Nina and James's perspectives on their marital problems were very different from each other. Did they share blame for the failure of their marriage? Were there signs early in the marriage that there were problems? Could the Walker marriage have been "saved"? If so, how? If not, why not? Is divorce always the appropriate solution for a troubled marriage? Was it the appropriate solution for the Walkers?

7. Even prior to the final divorce, James moved to a more solitary life. To our knowledge, neither he nor Nina remarried or had a romantic relationship ever again. Do you think that James might have been happier if he had never married? Are some types of people meant to remain single? Nina enjoyed later life with her children and grandchildren. What did James enjoy?
8. The author attempted to present the Walker case objectively. Some readers may feel she sided with Nina, while others may feel she sided by James. Have you chosen sides?
9. At the conclusion of the book the author notes that James and Nina had very different expectations for their marriage. Thinking about the married couples you know, how do their expectations differ from each other? Does this make them incompatible, or can differences be bridged? Does it depend on what kind of differences couple face and how important they are to the individuals involved?