

# READING NOTES

# I Give Marriage a Year

I'm going to try  
my  
everything  
to save it.



HOLLY  
WAINWRIGHT



# BLURB

## How far would you go to save your marriage?

Lou and Josh have been together for fourteen years. They share two kids, a mortgage, careers and plenty of history. Now, after a particularly fraught Christmas, Lou is ready to ask herself: is this marriage worth hanging on to?

Every month for a year, Lou sets a different test for their relationship – from daily sex to brutal honesty – to help her decide if she should stay or go. Secrets are exposed, old wounds reopened and a true-to-life suburban love story unfolds.

*I Give my Marriage a Year* paints a sharply accurate, often hilarious picture of a modern Australian marriage. Lou and Josh are a couple on the edge, and their efforts to bring their relationship back from the brink will resonate with anyone who has ever asked themselves: is this enough?

Whose side will you take? Who deserves a second chance? And will Josh and Lou stay together or split for good?

## THE AUTHOR

Holly Wainwright is a writer, editor and broadcaster who lives in Sydney with her young family. She's the Head of Content at women's media company Mamamia and *I Give my Marriage a Year* is her third novel.



# PLOT SUMMARY

**\*Note: This summary contains spoilers\***


There are two timelines in this novel: 2019, in which Lou and Josh are at a crossroads in their marriage, and the past, from 2005 to 2018, in which the reader sees the history of their relationship unfold. As 2019 progresses and Lou tests her marriage to Josh in various ways, the reader is also shown the secrets, traumas and joys that have gone before. Theirs has been a typical modern marriage in many ways: money struggles, difficult parents, career indecision, a sizeable mortgage, the spectre of infidelity and the ups and downs of children.

The book opens on New Year's Day, 2019, when Lou decides it's make-or-break time for her marriage after a particularly difficult Christmas. She decides to try everything she can think of to save it, month by month, and to decide at the end of the year whether to stay or go. Revealed early is the fact that Lou has been having an affair.

In January, Lou and Josh try having sex every day for the month. In February, they decide to have more fun – which takes the form of Josh signing them up to sing in a school fundraiser as a joint project. Unfortunately it's clear that these attempts are just wallpapering over the cracks, so in March they begin therapy. In April, they decide to spend some quality time in nature by going camping for Easter, but this turns into a serious disaster when a school family accompanies them and it is revealed the woman, Dana, has a crush on Josh and kisses him in an alcohol-fuelled moment around the campfire. Lou abandons Josh at the campsite with all the gear and leaves with their daughters.

In May, with things at crisis point, Lou decides on a policy of honesty and comes clean about her year-long experiment. Josh takes it badly, but it does clear the air momentarily and put them on a more equal footing with each other. In June Lou tries to focus on staying positive and not looking for problems. Josh turns to an online counsellor for help, with patchy results. At this point we discover that in 2015 Lou had an abortion despite having mixed feelings about it, and shortly afterwards began an affair with a colleague. Although she ended it at the time, and confessed to Josh, the reader is aware she has since been seeing her lover again – and Josh doesn't know.

In July, Lou and Josh begin a trial separation in which they 'bird-nest', taking turns staying in the family home to be with their daughters. In August, Lou attempts to 'be the best she can be', staying strong for the girls and testing her limits, and Josh finds some unexpected positives in the space that the trial separation has forced on him. In September they 'try the single life', including dating apps and school-gate run-ins with other school parents. And in October, to slow their girls' emotional roller-coaster, they try to 'put the girls first'.



Then Josh has some unexpected success at work and comes to the conclusion that enough is enough – he and Lou need to come to a decision.

And so November arrives. The reader experiences the Christmas in 2018 that nearly broke Lou, just as the bushfires of late 2019 make their presence felt and smoke blankets Sydney. In therapy, Josh asks Lou to confess fully to what happened with her affair, and when Lou balks, he walks out. Lou realises she needs to confess to everything if she is to rescue her marriage. In the end, she does so, and Josh needs time to process the information and the hurt.


In December, Lou decides to let go – not of the marriage necessarily, but of the idea that she can decide its fate on her own. An unexpected visit from Dana gives her more food for thought. Meanwhile Josh dashes up the coast to help his mother Emma as bushfires approach her home. Then it's too late to leave and Josh and Emma are trapped in a rescue centre on Christmas Eve. At home, Lou has the most honest conversation with her mother she's had in years. Both having seen first-hand what's really important to them, when Josh comes home he and Lou decide to do Christmas again – and then get back together.

## THEMES

### Marriage

*How did desire turn to disgust? Was that just what happened after your body shifted from belonging to you to belonging to your children? Or was it what happened under a pile-up of disappointments, sleepless nights and towels left on the floor? If Lou was completely honest with herself, she knew there was a turning point, a moment when that changed. Could it be changed back? (Page 4)*

1. Over the course of the novel, we see Lou and Josh's relationship in its heady early days and through the turbulence of the realities of modern marriage: the arrival of their children, uncertain career prospects, a hefty mortgage. What do you think it is about Lou and Josh, or their specific circumstances, that has contributed to the fragility in their marriage, fourteen years on? How typical is this of modern relationships, do you think?
2. One in three Australian marriages ends in divorce, but this rate has been steadily decreasing since no-fault divorce was introduced in 1976. Why do you think the rate has been decreasing? What social factors might be contributing to this trend, in your opinion?
3. What are some of the ways in which Lou and Josh's lives changed across the years of their relationship? What factors influenced these changes, and how have they affected how Lou and Josh feel about each other?

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4. On pages 120–129, Josh must rank the top ten values that are important to him from a list provided by Sara the therapist. These include Creativity, Loved, Loving, World Peace, Simplicity, Hope, Acceptance, Family, Monogamy, Fun, Security, Family, Forgiveness and Passion. What qualities do partners in a marriage or long-term relationship need to have for it to survive, do you think? Do Lou and Josh have these qualities? Why do you think some relationships succeed while others fail? Which values would you choose as being most important to you?

## Parenthood

*To say a baby changes things is the understatement of a lifetime, Lou decided. If pregnancy had made her feel like a stranger in her own body, the first year of motherhood had made her feel like a stranger in her own life. (Page 178)*

5. Becoming a parent inevitably creates a seismic shift in people’s lives, particularly for women but also for men. For Lou and Josh, despite the best intentions, having Stella caused a drift towards more traditional roles – Josh as breadwinner and Lou as homemaker – which Lou, especially, feels very uneasy and resentful about. Why do you think this is such a dilemma for modern parents? What social pressures and expectations make this better or worse?
6. The complexity, chaos and exhaustion of family life with young children can put new pressures on relationships. What changes are wrought in Lou and Josh’s lives after Stella, and then Rita, arrive? How do Lou and Josh try to address these, if at all?

## The repercussions of past trauma

7. Lou and Josh’s relationship may have survived the arrival of children, but the unexpected pregnancy and abortion in 2015 mark a turning point in their marriage. What is it about the decision to have an abortion that makes Lou so angry with Josh, even when it is a decision she knows is the right one for her? How do these events contribute to her decision to embark on an affair with Theo?
8. Eventually, Josh decides he can understand and live with Lou’s infidelity, just as she comes to understand his stance on the abortion. What do you think about these choices? Was he right to forgive her, and she him, in your opinion? What would you have done?
9. Josh and Lou seek marriage counselling to try to work through their problems. Do you think it helps? What do you think of the approach Sara the therapist takes?



# CHARACTERS

## Lou

10. Lou uses running as a way to get some independence back after Stella's arrival, and again when she tries to do something for herself in 2019. What are the benefits of having a pastime that allows you to focus on your own wellbeing? Does it help Lou?
11. Lou finds returning to work after having her children both rewarding and very difficult. Discuss some of the ways in which life has changed for women over the past few decades, both for better and for worse. What expectations do you feel are put on women, regarding work and children? Are they achievable?
12. What do you think Lou was looking for in her affair with Theo, and why?

## Josh

13. Josh's love of the guitar and ambitions to write and play music take a back seat as his marriage unfolds, children arrive and financial realities bite. How does this affect Josh? How does Lou's attitude to his musical aspirations change, and how does this play out in their relationship?
14. Josh had a complicated relationship with his father, Len. How has this affected him, do you think? How do you think it has influenced the way Josh approaches his marriage and parents his children?

## Annabel and Emma

15. Annabel and Emma have very different parenting styles, although both clearly love their children fiercely. What are the ways in which they express this and how do they differ? How have these styles rubbed off on Lou and Josh?

## Gretchen

16. Seeing the events of Lou and Josh's life through Gretchen's eyes gives the reader a fresh perspective. What insights can we gain from Gretchen's opinions?
17. Both Josh and Lou have friends they can confide in, but Lou's friendship with Gretchen is particularly close. How does this benefit Lou? What are some of the differences between male and female friendships, in your opinion?



## SETTING

**18.** Lou and Josh live in a southern suburb of Sydney, but other areas of Sydney are also showcased in the novel. How do these settings inform our ideas about the people who live there and the events that take place there? Does the setting itself impact the events of the novel?

## WRITING STYLE

**19.** Holly Wainwright has chosen to tell this story in the third person past tense, split between Lou and Josh's points of view and across two timelines. What is the effect of this structure? How does it shape the reader's understanding of each of the protagonists, as well as of the other characters in the novel?