



## The Uncoupling

*Meg Wolitzer*

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When the elliptical new drama teacher at Stellar Plains High School chooses for the school play *Lysistrata*-the comedy by Aristophanes in which women stop having sex with men in order to end a war-a strange spell seems to be cast over the school. Or, at least, over the women. One by one throughout the high school community, perfectly healthy, normal women and teenage girls turn away from their husbands and boyfriends in the bedroom, for reasons they don't really understand. As the women worry over their loss of passion, and the men become by turns unhappy, offended, and above all, confused, both sides are forced to look at their shared history, and at their sexual selves in a new light.

## The Uncoupling Details

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Author : Meg Wolitzer

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## From Reader Review The Uncoupling for online ebook

### Snotchocheez says

I kept Ms. Wolitzer's name on my mental backburner for several months now...not necessarily because of the recent release of her *The Interestings* (which three of my Goodreads friends have already read and favorably reviewed) but because of her jacket blurb endorsement on the back of Nicholson Baker's "Book of Raunch" (aka House of Holes...and I'm all like "yeah! she loves bad porn! Gotta read her pronto!" Unless sales go through the roof, it's doubtful my little library's gonna get *The Interestings* anytime soon, so figured I'd take a look-see at the e-book version of her prior novel, *The Uncoupling*...then realized that I put this book way deep-er in my memory bank, thanks to my fellow Goodreaders' 2.82-star cume average of it. (YIKES!) My curiosity won out, though.

### 3.5 STARS

Ms. Wolitzer's charming feminist parable definitely deserves more love than a 2.82. Yeah, the ending is cheezy (and YA-esque, as one of my friends aptly observed), the flights of fancy Ms. Wolitzer takes are corny, but there was just so much I did like about this book that made me totally ignore its faults:

**Quirky Premise!** Stellar Fields, NJ's females, subsequent to its High School's announcement of the drama department's staging a production of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* are betaken by a spell that causes their male counterparts to fall out of sexual favor. (whoa!)

**Great Plot and Character Development!** Using the aforementioned (Eleanor Roosevelt) High School as a nexus, Ms. Wolitzer rolls out a handful of indelible characters: Robby and Dory (the married English teachers who are also the most popular teachers at school); Senor Mandelbaum ("the unusually lenient Spanish teacher"); Leanne Bannerjee, (the school psychologist, who dispenses pearls of wisdom to the students as well as safe sex tips, while being Staff Slut away from campus); Abby Means, (the unhinged math teacher that busts a gasket when you take her Diet Splurge from the staff refrigerator, and may possibly be afflicted with Aspergers') etc. etc....coupled with:

**An Exquisite (and hilarious) Eye (and, even, Nose) For Details:** like how the Math Teacher's foods stored in the staff refrigerator transmogrify into "vingegar douche"-smelling things, or how Robby and Dory's mutual perspiration takes on a chicken brothy-smell...perfect.

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I could go on and on, page after page of just hysterical observations, poignant dialog...which kept me laughing, and devouring pages, and...yeah, it's not entirely certain where Ms. Wolitzer was going with this, or if she was making a larger societal statement, but I kinda almost don't care.

*The Uncoupling* may not be quite as interesting as *The Interestings* but I for one can't wait to read more by this author. I encourage you, if you liked *The Interestings* please don't be dissuaded by the 2.82 rating for this book like I initially was.

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## Bookphile says

When I first started reading *The Uncoupling*, I was hooked. Wolitzer has a way of painting such vivid scenes just by using the choicest of words or phrases, and she seemed to also be creating such complex characters. I was immediately emotionally vested in Dory and Robby and their marriage, and continued to be pulled in by the rather vast cast of characters. Unfortunately, things then began to fall apart. My biggest disappointment was that, what started out strong went out with a whimper. The book felt gimmicky, and I couldn't shake the sense that Wolitzer got right up to the edge of creating a really compelling novel, but then just couldn't quite find the momentum to take it over. Instead, the entire narrative ends up falling really short. Some spoilers ahead.

This is a shame, because Wolitzer is really scratching the surface of some interesting themes here, and this book could have been such a strong exploration of the lives of women at various stages of life, and what drives them. Sure, this is a book about sex, but it's also a book that offers up some other themes that are just as deep, but then fails to deliver on them. We have Dory's sense of fatigue with the sameness of her marriage. We have Bev's body issues. We have the gym teacher's sense that her body belongs to everyone but her, that nothing is really hers and hers alone. I really liked all of these themes, and I desperately wanted to see them fully developed, but they never were. Instead, we get a *deus ex machina* (appropriate, I suppose, since this book centers around the performance of an ancient Greek comedy) and everything seems magically resolved.

I was also very disappointed in Fran's reaction at the end. It would have been a nicely done bit of poetic justice, but I never cared enough about Fran to feel much of anything about the way her plan backfired. It was also difficult for me to figure out what motivated her to go from town to town staging the play, and I think this is because Wolitzer was rather vague about this aspect. Does Fran do it because she wants to help people? It sort of sounds like that, but not entirely. Does she do it just because she can? It also sort of sounds like that.

My other big issue with the novel was that there was a whole lot of telling but not as much showing. We're explicitly told that the gym teacher feels like she has nothing for herself, but not given many examples of it. Instead, we see her one time in the kitchen where she starts out happy but then immediately becomes dissatisfied. I just could not buy this. Was she actually growing more and more discontent all along and this simply didn't come through? Had Wolitzer spent a little more time establishing this character, that sort of question would have been answered.

When I think about summarizing the book succinctly, I'd say it comes across as an outline. It's as if Wolitzer had a list of various types of dissatisfaction and then she created characters who fit the molds. They were then inserted into the story, with a little bit of narrative, and that was that. While I did find Dory to be well-developed, the other characters felt to me more like types than like actual people.

Finally, I really, strongly disliked the ending. The tone of the novel was so serious in general, and the misery of these women (particularly Dory) was so extreme that it felt kind of insulting to give it an after school special sort of ending. Yes, I did want a happy ending for Dory, but I wanted there to be some exploration, some change that led to it. There was none of this. Instead, the spell is broken, the men all get up on stage to profess their love, and that's the end. It's a disappointing final note to a disappointing novel.

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## Jacqie says

This novel was readable, but the author's humorous, somewhat cynical distance from her characters kept me

at a distance too. But there is some good writing there. The scenes of teenage Willa and her first boyfriend were poignant and evocative of my own teen insecurities. Bev's hurt at her husband's callous statement about her weight was also well done. Unfortunately, the main characters, Dory (?) and Rob, rang the least true. They had almost no personalities except to be nice, if somewhat judgmental, people. They run into trouble in a big hurry when Dory's desire for sex is magically taken away. So were they really that solid? Or maybe just not aware of what drove their relationship?

There were some pieces of writing that jogged me out of the story as I was beginning to get comfortable: for example, the dog that licked itself into lassitude regularly and didn't need anyone else to satisfy it. Sorry, but I just don't want or need to think about my dog's masturbatory life. Yuck. The theme of how people connect, or don't online these days felt trite and stereotypical, but maybe that was the point?

I sped along through the book as I read it, but didn't need to pick it up once I put it down. And I wasn't satisfied with the look at sex as part of relationship, since the spell fell indiscriminately on those who didn't deserve to have this happen to them. The male characters didn't come off in a way that made me feel empathy or compassion for them. The author's intermittent mockery of every single character left me feeling like I shouldn't care about any of them too much, and drew me out of the book.

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## Megan says

I liked the details Wolitzer used to describe her characters (I perked up whenever the picky and prickly Abby Means, she of the thrift store skirts and pornography-filled phone, showed up), but their lack of depth and, for the most part, drive, made this book a real drag to get through. The fairy-tale-ish, wishy-washy tone, coupled with the one-dimensional characters, was frustrating to me, because the book didn't seem grounded in reality. I don't mind magical realism at all, and in fact enjoy it in a lot of books, but the realism half wasn't apparent here.

The major problem I had with the characters was that they were passive: the spell acted upon them, and then they sank like stones and failed to do anything interesting. The women despaired. The men despaired. Same thing over and over. They attempted to fix the problem in predictable ways but it didn't work. Boring. Very boring. The energy in the book picked up with Marissa's chapter, in which her asexuality does turn into something active, not passive, and then finally, the play was actually staged, but other than that, this book was a sluggish book that failed to engage me

It wasn't nearly as meditative or complex as I had thought it'd be in terms of exploring issues of sexuality, asexuality, or celibacy. The heavy-handed ending just made me feel manipulated, just as the characters were. *Lysistrata* was just an excuse to use these characters as puppets, but the play itself is a far more worthwhile read.

*Pre-reading comments:* I won a copy of this through First Reads, and while waiting for it to arrive, I'm brushing up on my *Lysistrata*. I've been part of a performance of it but hadn't really read it with patience or depth (though I certainly remember a lot of the dirty innuendos). I'm looking forward to reading this.

Note: I received a review copy of this book for free from the publisher via the First Reads program here at Goodreads.

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## Emily says

I really want to like this book. I read it in just 3 days, so I guess that says something. But I didn't love it. I didn't find any of the characters compelling or particularly likeable (not that that's a problem for me: on the contrary, I love unlikeable characters. Case in point: *The Descendants*). Willa? Eh. The Dorys? Annoying. Bev? She's fat. Waah. Leanne? Wow she sleeps around what a whore. Nothing new here. The only character I liked a little bit was Ruth Winik, the ex-lesbian of sorts. But then her boundary issues came out of nowhere. It seemed like Wolitzer was stretching to make up all of the possible reasons women wouldn't want to have sex anymore. This book was strange, and made me feel kind of sad. The writing was good in some places, but the whole wishy-washy style of it, the slow spread of the spell, irritated and bored me to tears. And the magical ending? Come on. Fran. Give me a break. And so much for resolution for Willa and Eli! The more I write about this book, the more frustrated I am.

On the whole, an interesting read, an interesting idea, but not a whole lot to it, I suppose. Not my favorite thing I've read all summer.

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## switterbug (Betsey) says

Once upon a time... On a dark and stormy night...wait--there was no storm. Long ago and far away...but, it was only a few years ago, and not far if you live in suburban New Jersey. So, one dark and December night in the safe and tidy suburb of Stellar Plains, New Jersey, an arctic chill seeped under doors, a frigid blast blew through windows, and a glacial nipping swirled between the sheets of spouses and lovers. And, just as suddenly, the woman turned from their men, and stopped having sex.

A spell had been cast, unbeknownst to the enchanted. Married woman turned in disgust from their husbands, and teen girls recoiled from their pimply boyfriends. The town was in chaos, but nobody was talking.

At the start of the new school year, the new bohemian and canny drama teacher, Fran Heller, had come to teach at Eleanor Roosevelt High School (Elro), where much of the action takes place. She was staging a production of *Lysistrata*, the ancient Greek play written by Aristophanes. And, in case you aren't familiar with it, it is about an entire city of woman that resolves to stop having sex with their men in order to end the Peloponnesian War. That includes their favorite position—The Lioness on The Cheese Grater. Yeah, think about it! This extraordinary mission inflames the battle between the sexes in Athens, just as the suburban spell provokes a war between the mates in Stellar Plains.

Dory and Robby Lang, the central couple of the book, are spirited English teachers at Elro with a high approval rating with students. Until this spell, the Langs had a youthful vigor and robust sex life. Their sophomore daughter Willa, who Dory has deemed “conventional” (average), had found first love with Eli, the drama teacher's son. But things are now frigid in the soundless fury of their house. Only their old lazy dog lingers to lick himself clean.

The Nordic, big-boned gym teacher, Ruth, had a largely healthy sex life with her sculptor husband—as active as one can expect with twin toddlers and an infant—all boys. She was not immune from the “enchantment,” either. Then there is Bev, a stout and menopausal woman with her hedge fund husband, Ed, who had said some cruel things to her not long ago. The spell has her in its grip, and she is fighting back frisky.

Does Leanne Bannerjee, the hot school psychologist, go on an icy sex strike when the wind chill factor blows her way? She has three boyfriends and a love life that rivals her students.

Wolitzer's prose is gusty and cinematic, immaculate from start to finish, with well-considered, write-'em-down one-liners and irrepressible, lucid characters. The voice and style are similar to Tom Perotta, but with a more whimsical moral thrust. The spell's chaos must reach some conclusion, and this is where the reader enjoys sliding into the ice.

This is a domestic comedy/drama with some acid moments, some poignant insights, and a sprinkling of the psychology of love, coupling, and married life. To enjoy this book, it helps to be flexible about a few unrealistic elements present in a contemporary, earth-bound setting.

This is warm Wolitzer on ice, with a few Mazurkas and a double lutz finale. She did employ a risky contrivance, but it was an active choice, not a slack trick of the pen. Along the way, she demonstrates fine regard to our tech-savvy, digitally addicted society. A delicious sorbet book, this is sly chick-lit that pricks—and puts a spell on you.

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## Miles says

When a famous feminist author came to Reed College in the late 1970s, the men of Reed College learned that among her teachings was the notion that "hetero-sex is violence", and it was clear that some of our dreams for our sophomore year were not going to come true. Texts matter, and when, in Meg Wolitzer's "The Uncoupling", a high school drama teacher decides to stage Aristophane's *Lysistrata*, in which women of ancient Greece stage a sex strike to end the Peloponnesian war, we are once again in the place where ideas and texts have the power to change relationships, and, perhaps, the world.

One way to write any story is to imagine a world that is just like ours, except that one small thing is missing. For example, oranges. Or gasoline. Or prepositions. Or the letter "e", as in the case of *La Disparition* ("The Disappearance"), a 300-page French lipogrammatic novel by Georges Perec.

Or, you can imagine a world in which women, mysteriously (to them, and to the reader) lose interest in sex with their male partners. As an author, you pull the single thread of female desire for men out of the tapestry of life and you watch what unravels.

What you get in this case is a knife cutting through the strata of a suburban high school community, laying bare the inner realities of heterosexual relationships of many qualities and types. Sex, here, is the subject, to be sure, but it is also the veil that, when removed, creates a window through the skin of society. We are not shown everything about the many couples who populate this world, but we are shown the diversity of their loving and boring and thriving and dying heterosexual relationships, and the unraveling that occurs when the female partner experiences no desire and sex vanishes. Even though the women of this book are "infected" by the loss of desire, victims of a spell that none have any awareness of, some choose to claim the loss and to transform their new loss of interest in, even their revulsion for, the advances of their men, into their power.

The *Lysistrata* becomes real, Peloponnesia becomes modern Afghanistan, and the sexual becomes political. In this *Lysistrata* the women and men are no obscure Greek abstractions, but recognizable moderns, homosuburbus, wrapped in a dozen different familiar personal struggles. Hilarity ensues, of a dark kind, and if the political meaning of the chaotic dénouement is a little muddled, well, we had a nice ride through modern suburbia anyway. This is the story of the ambivalent pleasures of indifference, and the power that comes from not needing.

Wolitzer's imagining is well written, with particularly sensitive and thoughtful characterizations of the sexual lives of adolescents, female and male, as they stumble their way through first encounters and toward sexual and emotional self-awareness. She sets their experiences in contrast to the desires of protagonists in their 30s, 40s and 50s, yet draws women of all ages together in their common experience of loss of interest in men, and their shared wrestling with the place of men in their lives.

How would this story be different if it were the men who lost interest? I suppose that's another book.

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### **Gayla Bassham says**

This book could have been amazing but it ended up just being half-baked. Wolitzer's characters, as always, are interesting and sharply observed, but the plot didn't quite work for me. The "spell" just seems like a deus ex machina, and the half-hearted explanation of it at the end felt tacked-on and unconvincing. And the theme of the book could have been better explored if the spell had not been a literal magic spell but a zeitgeist or a conscious political movement. A disappointment.

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### **M says**

(This really deserves 3, 3.5 - I will explain).

The Talmud speaks about a time when, because temptation was so strong, leaders prayed that the stirrings of desire would be taken away and allow people to live freely and purely. However, upon the vanishing of the more basic components of the human experience, life as we know it - animal, plant - shriveled up as well. This lesson resonated then, and was called to mind upon reading this work which, like Wolitzer's others, presents an interesting if somewhat ambiguous nouveau feminist bend.

The Uncoupling takes on a premise that, were it any other author I would have promptly eschewed in that there is a magic spell (two words that are enough to send me packing) that overtakes a small town when the new drama teacher directs her high school students in *Lysistrata*, a Greek play depicting women refusing their husbands so as to stop war. Instantly, the girls and women of this town feel an inner coldness and begin to turn away as well, leading to all kinds of interesting questions as to feminism, power, intimacy and the role it plays in relationships.

Wolitzer, to me, is what Piccolt wishes she were. Here are artfully crafted details without seeming to try too hard. Here is an understanding of teenagers without sounding like a forty year old person trying painfully to speak street. And this is why, despite a too neat ending and an unclear message, I am granting this work four stars - because I picked it up Wednesday morning and by evening I had finished it and enjoyed just relishing in her easy but thoughtful prose, and the quiet whimsy of her characters.

I therefore give this credit for being highly readable, if somewhat dubious in ultimate execution.

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### **Shannon says**

3/5

The Uncoupling by Meg Wolitzer is an examination of love, sex, and relationships, and while the majority of the novel is planted in reality, there are aspects of magic and mysticism which make the book what it is. The writing is astute and well realized, and the characters are distinct and authentic. However, perhaps the plot is too meandering, therefore feeling slow. Ultimately I think this novel suffered from a case of "Thoughtful and



well written, but with nothing actually happening." I enjoyed the surprise at the end, but I could have done with a few more elements of surprise to have maintained my interest throughout.

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## **Suzanna says**

Meg Wolitzer has a way of packing intelligence and humor into every sentence. I have to admit, I'm a longtime fan. Follow the citizens of the suburban town of Stellar Plains, New Jersey, as they stumble through the "dilemma" of their uncoupling. The pace is relentless. Wolitzer dives into her subject by writing full, deep characters. I felt like they were all my new best friends. You'll laugh, think, and notice -- through her laser sharp eye -- the absurd details of modern life, as if you were watching people who dwell on another planet that you didn't realize you live on. Whether she's inside the teacher's room at the high school, or in the basement with teenagers who are fumbling around with sex, it's an itch-scratching romp of excruciating exactness. There's no predictable cynicism and no TV jokes. She does it by telling it like it is; how does she do that? I dunno. She's an artist at the height of her craft. I highly recommend this book. It's a joyful read, all about sex -- no easy task.

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## **Judy says**

I am so over Meg Wolitzer. My three novel study, read in under two weeks, rendered me in turn unable to stay awake during the day, unable to sleep at night, unable to digest my food, and generally irritable all over. She is simply a bad writer and I cannot fathom how she gets even one good review, though she gets many.

What she does do well is capture and relate the thoughts women have privately as well as the commonplace emotions of women. It is true that we only share those thoughts and feelings privately, even with other women. Possibly despite feminism, consciousness raising and even the age of confessional memoir, we are most of us somewhat ashamed to think or feel as we do. So to read our thoughts and feelings in a novel is startling and comforting at the same time.

In *The Uncoupling*, a new drama teacher arrives at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Stellar Plains, New Jersey. Fran Heller is unconventional in dress, attitude and lifestyle. Supposedly she has a husband living in Michigan with whom she is still very much in love. They talk everyday and visit each other several times a year. Their teenage son lives with Fran during the school year and with his father in the summer.

Fran chooses for the school play a Greek comedy by Aristophanes. In "Lysistrata" the women agree to stop having sex with men until the endless Peloponnesian War is over. On the day that auditions open, an enchantment, accompanied by cold winds, comes over several women, rendering them suddenly undesirable of sex. As the weeks of rehearsal pass more and more females, including sexually active teens, give up sex. The denied men become variously confused, heart broken, frustrated, or openly angry.

It takes her about 100 pages to set all this in place and despite the ineptly contrived back stories, some improbable characters and tone deaf dialogue, I was intrigued. The next 100 pages were a punishing description of how all the women and men interacted, felt, and made unsuccessful attempts to communicate about what was happening.

I will concede that the teen characters were accurately, even humorously, almost sympathetically portrayed. I

can appreciate that Meg Wolitzer has a keen eye for people of all ages and both sexes as well as an accurate finger on the pulse of modern society. She just can't write well about most of it.

Reading Wolitzer is like taking a ride with a bad driver. Her prose is uneven. She will write a stunning metaphor and then fall into the oddest, nausea producing imagery. After pages of plodding paragraphs, she will finally get a bit of drama going, only to let it fall flat. I am always aware that any given character is an example of a type, until I utterly fail to care about what happens to any of them.

After tantalizing references to the war in Afghanistan, to teenage sexual awareness and dependence on social networking plus texting, or to the loss of sexual interest amongst married middle-aged couples, she winds up her story of dubious enchantment with platitudes. Give me a break!

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## **Jill says**

The Uncoupling is a good book that could have been a great book.

It has some perceptive and provocative insights into the nature of desire itself: what is desire, anyway? How does it change between the heady times of first love and the more mundane times of adulthood? Can a relationship sustain itself when desire flees?

The book unfolds around the classic and comic play *Lysistrata*, written by Aristophanes – a tale of women of Greece who determined to withhold sex as a way to end the lengthy Peloponnesian War. Around the same time that the new drama teacher at Eleanor Roosevelt High School chooses the play, the women of Stellar Plains, New Jersey mysteriously and suddenly turn from their husbands, boyfriends, and lovers, no longer wanting to engage in sex.

The “stunning bolt of cold air” -- which is the harbinger for the lack of desire – the enchantment and spell – is somewhat evocative of Alice Hoffman’s writing. One by one, the women succumb to it – Dory Lang, who suddenly begins making excuses to her cherished spouse...Bev, an overweight guidance counselor who is smarting over a careless weight-focused remark by her husband...Leanne, a beautiful and definitely non-monogamous school psychologist who loses all interest...Ruth, the ex-lesbian gym teacher and harried young mother who feels sex has become an obligatory date...and last of all, Willa, Dory’s daughter, who is the throes of first love.

Had *The Uncoupling* focused on the question asked by Bev (“I keep thinking, how did this happen? For a long time, it wasn’t like this) or Leanne (“Is the choice in life to either have some overly intense and basically impractical relationships with men or else to settle down?”) or even the musings of Dory (“Maybe sex doesn’t even belong to us anymore. It belongs mostly to the kids, and we’re just hanging around too long”), this might have been a stronger book.

But Ms. Wolitzer chooses to go with a magical realism overlay, distancing the reader from the characters and adding a layer of comedy to the very real issues of adults and teenager struggling to maintain intimacy in the wake of young family obligations, perimenopause, and day-to-day stresses. The boundaries of believability are stretched at the end in ways that will become apparent to a new reader. *The Uncoupling* is built upon an irresistible premise and written in a breezy tone that somehow, falls a little flat.

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## Colleen says

I think Wolitzer had a really hard time reining herself in. I'm working off the assumption that the blunt-eccentric-but-weirdly-wise (also, callous b!tch, but that's another problem) magical drama teacher, Fran Heller, is the author-avatar here. But even taking that as a given, it's difficult to peel back the layers of pretentious metaphors and pseudo-wise musings to figure out what point Heller/Wolitzer wants the reader to walk away with.

There's something she's trying to say about war--I think. And there's a message in there about technology among youth, somehow, except in the abrupt ending it's (maybe) recanted. Also there's something about desire, and the desirability of taking abrupt action to shape up your life, but the author seems to be of about seventeen minds on those subjects. Should the example of Eli and Willa make the reader think that it's wrong and cruel to tinker with lives or take a stand for the sheer sake of taking a stand? Should the example of Robby and Dory make the reader think that being entirely cruel to someone you love is great because it magically brings you closer together (with a necessary mind-wipe twist to the magic because, presumably, the author realized that in truth this authentically in-love couple could not move on blissfully from a several-months rift in their relationship without assistance from a 'spell'?) Should Heller's relationship with her husband be the example everyone should follow--forever long-distance, a cheapo shortcut to a lasting marriage?

Though it was a mostly-breezy and sometimes funny read, it struck me from the beginning as kind of a pointless novel, and on finishing I was disappointed to realize I was right. And no, that's not a sexual metaphor. It was just not that good.

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## Rachel says

Meg Wolitzer's writing skirts the line between literary fiction and beach read. On one hand, she has a clever eye for human thought and folly that makes me look forward to her books. On the other hand, her plots are often novel and neatly wrapped up in a way that undermines whatever effort she puts into character building.

The same praise and criticism applies to *The Uncoupling*. However, it does have a truly terrible climax (appropriate for a book with a lot of fail sex) that is so cheesy it belongs in YA. In fact, it was done recently in YA. Have you read *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*? It's sort of like the end of that book, but with adults. Adults are spontaneously emoting onstage at a high school play. Except they're doing it to break a magical spell that keeps them from having sex with each other. And this *works*.

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