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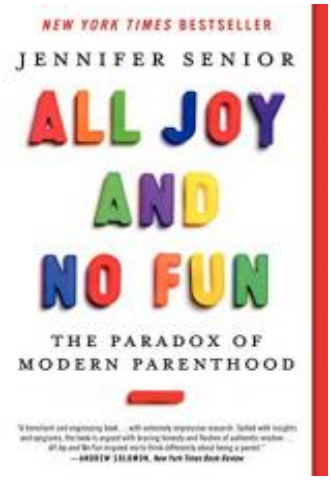
All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood

by Jennifer Senior



About the Book

Thousands of books have examined the effects of parents on their children. But almost none have thought to ask: What are the effects of children on their parents?

The BEA Buzz Book, now in paperback! In ALL JOY AND NO FUN, award-winning journalist Jennifer Senior analyzes the many ways children reshape their parents' lives, whether it's their marriages, their jobs, their habits, their hobbies, their friendships, or their internal senses of self. She argues that changes in the last half century have radically altered the roles of today's mothers and fathers, making their mandates at once more complex and far less clear. ALL JOY AND NO FUN is the instant *New York Times* bestseller that *The Christian Science Monitor* declared "an important book, much the way THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE was, because it offers parents a common language, an understanding that they're not alone."

Discussion Guide

1. Senior suggests that there are three developments that have changed and complicated modern parenting in America. First, control over when and how many children to have; second, how our work lives have become more complicated; and third, the transformation of the child?s role in home and society. Do you find these three issues present in your own household? How have you found ways to address these challenges in parenting?

2. In her chapter on marriage, Senior says men and women experience time differently. Women, she notes, feel like their time is divided and subdivided and their failure to get everything done in the amount of time they have is tied to their sense of self. Senior writes, ?Being compelled to divide and subdivide your time doesn?t just compromise your productivity...It also creates a feeling of urgency --- a sense that no matter how tranquil the moment?there?s always a pot somewhere that?s about to boil over? (59). Do you find that this aligns with your role as a parent? Does this affect your

relationship with your partner in the way Senior suggests?

3. Senior says that one of the most common fights among parents is the household division of labor. Is this true in your house? Did you arrange these divisions ahead of time or improvise as you went along?

4. In her chapter on adolescence, Senior suggests that having adolescent children around unmasks tensions that were previously concealed. Did you find this to be the case? If so, what? Did it start earlier than adolescence, even?

5. Senior suggests that one of the joys of having young children is re-engaging with the physical world --- doing things with your hands. Did this happen for you? What did you do? What pleasure does (or did) your young child allow you to do that you wouldn?t have done otherwise?

6. Senior observes that kids give adults a chance to practice philosophy again. What are some of the most baffling questions your children have asked you? How did you answer them? Did you find it a pleasure to answer those questions?

7. Do you think that the value of happiness is overemphasized in our culture, and we all might relax a little if we embraced the notions of duty and service instead?

8. What parts of parenting do you find hardest to talk about? What parts give you most pleasure?

9. As Senior profiles Angie and Clint?s daily challenges as modern parents, we see Clint declare: ?I am the standard.? While Senior observes that fathers tend to judge themselves less harshly than mothers, and that they have fewer cultural and historical scripts to follow, she also remarks that mothers might have something to learn from fathers. Do you agree with this suggestion? How would you go about it?

10. In what ways does Senior?s description of joy mirror your own experience as a parent, and in what ways does it differ? Does Senior?s distinction between joy and fun capture your own reality as a parent? How so?

11. Sharon and Cam?s story becomes one of the book?s most poignant threads. How did Sharon?s unique perspective as both a parent and grandparent affect you?

12. In her chapter Concerted Cultivation, Senior speaks of the ?overscheduled parent,? asking, ?What, precisely, are we preparing our children for? How, as mothers and fathers, are we supposed to prepare them for it? Have parents always operated this blindly? Or were the roles of parents and children more clearly --- and simply --- defined in the past?? (123). Do you believe the ?globalized future? has affected your choices as a parent? How so? How do you deal with these stressors in your family?

13. As a journalist, Senior pairs a great deal of research and complex social science with intimate stories of real families. Did you find this approach illuminating? Insightful? Relatable?

14. How do you think your ?remembering self? will look back on the years of raising a toddler? A middle-schooler? An adolescent?

Author Bio

Jennifer Senior is a contributing editor at *New York* magazine. She lives in New York with her family.

Critical Praise

?Salted with insights and epigrams, the book is argued with bracing honesty and flashes of authentic wisdom?[an] excellent book.?

?Andrew Solomon, *The New York Times* Book Review

?[An] astute book? clear and helpful? refreshing?an eye opening debut, and it will help a lot of parents feel less alone, if not less frazzled.?

?Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

"An important book, much the way THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE was, because it offers parents a common language, an understanding that they're not alone in their struggles, and an explanation of the cultural, political, and economic reasons for them."

?The Christian Science Monitor

?If you?re a parent in the year 2014, you have to get your hands on a copy of this book. Wise, engrossing, and so real that I fear perhaps Jennifer Senior has been spying inside my house, ALL JOY AND NO FUN is a must-read for those of us whose lives have been immeasurably enriched and logistically derailed by having kids.?

?Curtis Sittenfeld, bestselling author of PREP and AMERICAN WIFE.

?Jennifer Senior?s excellent new book? is not prescriptive. She doesn?t tell parents to be more mindful or drink more wine or neglect their kids; she just wants them to understand why they are always so stressed out.?

?Hanna Rosin, *Slate*

?Senior?s wise compassion provides guidance that?s both necessary and inspiring.?

?*Boston Globe*

?Attention childless persons: If you?re thinking of having kids, and are looking for an accurate assessment of the experience, disregard the holiday cards you may have received that portray merry families in various stages of triumph. Instead, read Jennifer Senior?s book. This eloquent read is a tonic?

? *Huffington Post*

?[ALL JOY AND NO FUN is a] richly woven, entertaining, enlightening, wrenching and funny book.?

?*Washington Post*

?[The] glimpses into the conundrums of other parents are thought-provoking and fun to read?

?*Newsday*

?Chatty, generous and yet statistically grounded reverse-angle of the usual studies of what parents do to children.?

?*New York Post*

?If you are tempted to read just one more book on the arguably over examined subject of parenthood, let it be Jennifer Senior?s wise and surprising ALL JOY AND NO FUN.?

?*Elle*

?Jennifer Senior successfully connects a barrage of scholarship with the real experiences of moms and dads, and the resulting book, ALL JOY AND NO FUN, is completely fascinating?.?

?BookPage

?A lovely, thoughtful book, written in a generous spirit and with a piercing intelligence. Jennifer Senior manages to mix unflinching social commentary with a warm and compassionate voice.?

?Susan Cain, bestselling author of QUIET: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking

?ALL JOY AND NO FUN captures the complex texture of parents lives, the joys and the sorrows, highs and lows, with remarkable insight, intelligence, sensitivity, and subtlety.?

?Alison Gopnik, bestselling author of THE PHILOSOPHICAL BABY

?Jennifer Senior has written a wonderful, smart, and deeply reported book that challenges many of the most sacred assumptions about modern parenthood. Written with authority and wisdom, it is destined to be the one book that all parents take with them on their mad, hair-raising, and, yes, joyous odyssey.?

?David Grann, bestselling author of THE LOST CITY OF Z

?Travelling far beyond the infant and toddler years into the acute challenges of adolescence, Senior ingeniously deconstructs the kinds of experiences that all parents have but few parents talk about. By taking the reality of parenting out of the closet, she reveals in countless ways that none of us are in this alone. I loved this book.?

?Madeline Levine, bestselling author of TEACH YOUR CHILDREN WELL

?A brilliant synthesis of history and social science, [ALL JOY AND NO FUN] is an indispensable map for a journey that most of us take without one. Brilliant, funny and brimming with insight, ALL JOY AND NO FUN is an important book that every parent should read, and then read again. Jennifer Senior is surely one of the best writers --- and wisest moms --- on the planet.?

?Daniel Gilbert, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of STUMBLING ON HAPPINESS

?ALL JOY AND NO FUN is the perfect intellectual Rx for today?s overstressed parents: a calm, clear-eyed synthesis of all the reasons their lives seem to be falling apart. While scrupulously considering the ?big data? recent studies --- as well as findings by pioneers like Margaret Mead --- Senior reports from the collapsing front lines of our striving middle class. Yet this book?s triumph is the way the author?s own observations, presented with winning modesty and offhanded

style, so brilliantly take down myths and assumptions to reveal why today?s parents find their experience of raising children so different from what their own childhoods had led them to expect. Amidst the bummers of modern parenthood, Senior finds jolts of transcendent meaning and satisfaction that liberate us from the ?mazes of self-interest? that can otherwise dominate our days --- it?s why we persist in bringing into the world creatures destined to wreck our lives. This is a profound book about the meaning of love and how we raise not just our children but ourselves.?

?Tom Reiss, author of THE BLACK COUNT, winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize

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