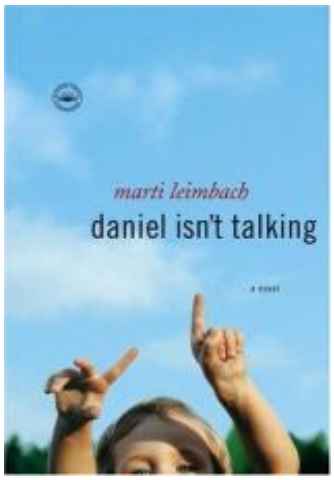
Daniel Isn't Talking: A Novel

by Marti Leimbach



About the Book

Marti Leimbach's first novel, **Dying Young**, was called "a masterpiece of details that always ring true, with the sad, funny and fascinating unpredictability of real life." With the same talent and perception, Leimbach's new novel takes the reader to London, to the home of the Marshes: Stephen Marsh, a true Brit; Melanie, a transplanted American; and their two children, four-year-old Emily and Daniel, just three. When it is conveyed that Daniel is autistic, the orderly life of the Marsh family is shattered.

Melanie is determined to fight to teach Daniel to speak, play and become as "normal" as possible. Her enchanting disposition has already helped her weather other of life's storms, but Daniel's autism may just push her over the brink, destroying her resolute optimism and bringing her unsteady marriage to an inglorious end. The situation is not helped by Stephen's far-from-supportive parents, who proudly display the family tree with Melanie's name barely penciled in, and who remain disconcertingly attached to Stephen's ex-fiancée, a woman apparently intent on restaking her claim on Stephen. Melanie does have one strong ally in Andy, a talented and off-the-wall play therapist who specializes in teaching autistic children. Andy proves that Daniel is far more capable than anyone imagined, and Melanie finds herself drawn to him even as she staggers toward resolving her marriage.

Daniel Isn't Talking is a moving, deeply absorbing story of a family in crisis. What sets it apart from most fiction about difficult subjects is the author's ability to write about a sad and frightening situation with a seamless blend of warmth, compassion and humor.

Discussion Guide

About the Reader's Guide

Daniel Isn't Talking is a novel about a woman who discovers her young son is autistic. It is taken in part from my own

life as I went through a similar experience five years ago when my son was diagnosed with autism. About my son: I can tell you I was certain there was something wrong with him for some time before the actual diagnosis. I used to ask the doctors about these obscure symptoms. Why does he walk on his toes, I'd ask. Why does he grind his teeth like that? Why doesn't he sleep at night? Or eat for that matter? I mean, surely he should eat? And why doesn't he talk?

And then one day the answer came and I wished I'd never asked the questions. "Because he is autistic," I was told.

Autism in a child does not affect only that child. It affects a whole family. Suddenly, everything in my life was different. My normally wonderful husband became remote, unhelpful. The only way I could be sure he took in what I had to say was if I texted him on his mobile. His relatives went around saying things like, "Well, we have no history of autism in our family." My own relatives, who are not warm and fuzzy people, weren't much help either. My aunt thought it was my own fault for having a baby so late in life (I was thirty-three). My sister would say things like, "Wow, he's autistic. So I guess you're going to have to do something with him."

Do something with him? I hate to think what she had in mind.

But, yes, I had to do something. And just like the character Melanie in **Daniel Isn't Talking** I found myself scrambling to figure out what.

But of course, the novel is not a memoir, and what Melanie does in **Daniel Isn't Talking** ends up being far more entertaining than anything in my actual life. Take, for example, the rather delicious Irish guy with whom she falls in love. I can tell you no such man has ever entered my house. I guess that's just as well because my husband is in my house. Eventually he dethawed and returned to being the nice guy he usually is.

In fact, very few of the events of the novel ever happened in my life, but the great thing about fiction is that you can take subject matter as difficult as that in **Daniel Isn't Talking** and fill it with humor, with surprises, with events that escort the reader gently through the minefield which has become these characters' lives. I positively loved writing the novel and I feel a particular affinity to it. I admire the main character, Melanie. She was so much braver than I was at the time of my son's diagnosis. I fell in love with the therapist who shows her how to teach her son. And of course the Daniel in the novel is so much like my own son, Nicholas, and brought back memories of the day Nicky finally said his first word --- at the age of three years and two months --- and how hard he fought to learn the simple things that other children take for granted.

So, this is an important book for me. The latest statistics reveal that one in every 165 families has a child on the autistic spectrum, so I know that the book is going to touch the hearts of many people. I hope it will also touch parents who find that it is sometimes difficult to connect with their children.

For more information on Autism or to make a donation to Autism Research please contact Autism Speaks at www.autismspeaks.org.

1. There are occasional flashbacks throughout the novel that give a glimpse of what Melanie was like before she had children. How would you describe her character before she became a mother? How has she changed?

2. Melanie and Stephen's house empties out of possessions as Melanie sells their things to pay for Daniel's various

therapies and other needs. What does Melanie mean when she says, "I'm in a different market than the rest of the world"?

3. How are the subjects of race and class treated in the novel?

4. Andy says he understands Melanie as an "autism mom." What is the implication of this term? How might Andy's perception of "autism moms" be different than that of most people Melanie encounters?

5. When Melanie tells Veena about Daniel's diagnosis, she makes an outright appeal for Veena's compassion and sympathy. Instead, Veena says, "You are a white woman living in a white woman's paradise. This is not the worst thing that can happen." What does Veena mean by this and why would Melanie find the words comforting?

6. How do you describe the connection between Melanie and Veena? How are these apparently very different women similar? What about their circumstances helps them to understand each other? Would they have been friends if Daniel were normal?

7. Early in the novel Melanie thinks she may be "unstable." Would you agree with that? Following Daniel's diagnosis, does she seem more or less "stable" to the world around her? To you as reader?

8. On the morning of Daniel's diagnosis Melanie's immediate reaction to the diagnosis is to say, "I feel that a change has taken place. I cannot help but feel as though I started the journey this morning with my beloved little boy and am returning with a slightly alien, uneducable time bomb." How has Daniel's diagnosis temporarily changed his mother's perception of him? What examples can be seen of her resisting this changed perception? How has Stephen's view of his son been altered by the diagnosis?

9. How does Daniel's diagnosis affect his sister, Emily? In what ways does Melanie try to shield Emily from the full implications of having a brother with autism? In what ways is she successful? In what ways is she not successful?

10. In what ways was Stephen's departure useful in helping Daniel? In the long run, was Stephen's departure a good thing for Daniel? For Emily? How might things have been different for the children if Stephen had stayed?

11. At the end of the novel Melanie states that Stephen "has shifted all blame for our marriage onto me. On to my whims and desires. At the same time he has cleverly cast his bid. He is smart. Maybe that is what I found so attractive about him. I do not find it so attractive now." How has Stephen made Melanie feel responsible for the failure of their marriage? Do you think she is to blame?

12. Melanie says that Andy "has touched a part of me that was dying and brought it to life once more. This belongs to him." What does Melanie means by this statement? What is the unusual nature of Melanie and Andy's connection and deepening relationship? What do they know about each other's families and backgrounds? Does this matter?

13. In Chapter 23 Melanie sees a group of young women at a bus stop. About one of them she says, "I want to tell her that she is a woman of great virtue. A woman of grace. That I admire her. And that I see her differently than perhaps she sees herself. Now that I have truly seen her, now that I have taken notice." In what sense has Melanie "truly seen" this young woman? What stops her from speaking to the woman?

14. How is the reader's experience of the novel affected by the knowledge that Marti Leimbach, herself, is an "autism mom?"

Author Bio

Marti Leimbach is the author of several novels, including the international bestseller DYING YOUNG, which was made into a major motion picture starring Julia Roberts; DANIEL ISN'T TALKING; and THE MAN FROM SAIGON. She lives in England and teaches at Oxford University's creative writing program.

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Critical Praise

"A satisfying story about a woman in crisis and a son with autism...Leimbach, herself the parent of an autistic child, does an excellent job of showing a mother fighting with every ounce of her being for what is right for her children and, ultimately, herself."

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