ReadingGroupGuides
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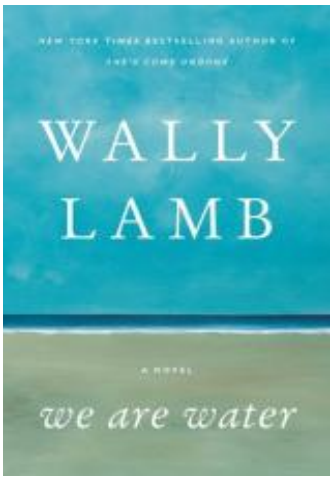
We Are Water

by Wally Lamb



About the Book

As her wedding day approaches, Annie Oh finds herself one morning staring at a bed covered in Vera Wang wedding dresses, at the mercy of hopes and fears about the momentous change on the horizon. This is not Annie?s first walk down the aisle. She has just emerged from a 27-year marriage to Orion Oh, which produced three children, twins Andrew and Ariane and daughter Marisa. Annie has been trying to reach her ex-husband, as she wants to make sure that he is all right. Orion, a psychologist with a crippling need to help others, keeps assuring everyone that he is fine.

But how can he be? Annie, a self-taught artist, is about to marry a woman named Viveca, the sophisticated and seductive art dealer who understands her work and has helped make her enormously successful. The Oh children have different responses to their mother?s upcoming wedding and her new partner. But when Viveca, who specializes in outsider art, discovers a painting by Josephus Jones, a self-taught African American artist of the 1950s and ?60s, in the Oh family home in Three Rivers, Connecticut, the already difficult relationship between Orion, Annie and Viveca becomes even more fraught. Jones?s canvases, and the story of his prematurely shortened life, come to play an unexpected role in the life of the Oh family. On the very day of the wedding, as its members struggle with their new roles in the reshaped family landscape, secrets are shared and shocking truths come to light.

A sweeping epic novel from one of America?s most beloved writers, WE ARE WATER pulls you into the emotional center of each richly drawn character. Even Annie?s impending marriage, apparently the source of the Oh family drama, turns out to be merely the catalyst that uncovers old hurts and renews past anger. An intricate and layered portrait of marriage and family, tempered by compassion, big-heartedness, and humor, WE ARE WATER recalls Richard Russo?s EMPIRE FALLS and Jonathan Franzen?s FREEDOM. Once again, Wally Lamb has dug down deep into the complexities of the human heart to explore the ways in which we all live, love, and find meaning in our lives.

*****BONUS FEATURE*****

Check out some highlights from Barbara Hoffert's interview with Wally Lamb about WE ARE WATER. Click here to see the videos.

Discussion Guide

1. Describe Anna and Orion Oh and their relationship. What factors drew them together and what drove them apart? What were your first impressions of each character? Did you see the characters in the same light by the novel?s end? Think about their names. Are they fitting for these characters? What other elements like this did you notice throughout the novel?

2. Talk about the Oh children. How do each of them relate to their parents? Were Anna and Orion good parents? What makes a good parent? Are they equally culpable for their impact on their children? How much of our lives are shaped by our families, and how much by our own choices? Choose a character or two from the Oh family and use examples from the book to support your thoughts.

3. The story begins by talking about the artist Josephus Jones. What role does he play in the story and the Ohs? lives? He is called a narrative painter in the story. Explain that term, what it signifies for you.

4. Family, tragedy, art, violence, secrets, love, and transformation are the themes at the heart of WE ARE WATER. By keeping things to ourselves and by sharing them inappropriately, are we doomed to keep repeating the mistakes of the past? How are Anna?s secrets both destructive and productive? What about the secrets the rest of the family keeps?

5. What is the attraction between Anna and Viveca? What does Viveca offer Anna that Orion cannot? What are your impressions of Viveca?

6. As the story unfolds we learn about Anna as a mother and her relationship with Andrew, her only son. Why does she treat him the way that she does? Is she truly aware of her behavior? Why don?t the children tell their father the truth about their mother? Were they protecting her?

7. Another supporting yet very important character in the novel is Kent. Share your thoughts about him. Does knowing his backstory affect your view? Do we in our hypercritical society lose sight of the fact that perpetrators are often victims themselves? What was Kent hoping for when he went to visit Anna on her wedding day?

8. Think about Orion. His profession is helping people, watching for signs, recognizing pain and rescuing his patients. How could he so spectacularly miss Anna?s suppressed emotions and those of his children? Was he too busy tending to others to notice his own family?s dysfunction? Could he have truly seen it or by being a part of this family was he too close?

9. Discuss Anna?s art. Does it sound appealing to you? Would she have her art without her pain? How is she like Josephus Jones --- what connects them?

10. After Anna shares her terrible secret with Andrew, he makes a crucial choice. What do you think of his actions? Was he morally justified? Is it good that he told his father about what happened? Would he feel better or worse if he

confessed?

11. Discuss the significance of the title, WE ARE WATER. How many meanings does it have? How does it connect to the final scene in the book?

12. How do each of the Ohs come to terms with who they are? Would you say that they --- and the novel itself --- have a happy ending?

13. Late in the novel, Orion mentions reading an article in the New York Times about scientists who studied the effects of reading fiction on the human brain. They found that reading fiction stimulates the brain in the same way that experiences in real life do. Why do you read fiction? Are novels and stories important, and if so, why? Does this experience match your own?

14. What did you take away from reading WE ARE WATER? If you?ve read Wally Lamb?s other books, how does its compare thematically?

Author Bio

Wally Lamb is the author of six *New York Times* bestselling novels: I?LL TAKE YOU THERE, WE ARE WATER, WISHIN? AND HOPIN?, THE HOUR I FIRST BELIEVED, I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE and SHE?S COME UNDONE. Lamb also edited COULDN'T KEEP IT TO MYSELF and I'LL FLY AWAY, two volumes of essays from students in his writing workshop at York Correctional Institution, a women?s prison in Connecticut, where he was a volunteer facilitator for 20 years. Lamb lives in Connecticut with his wife, Christine, and they have three sons.

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Publication Date: October 22, 2013
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 576 pages
Publisher: Harper
ISBN-10: 0061941026
ISBN-13: 9780061941023