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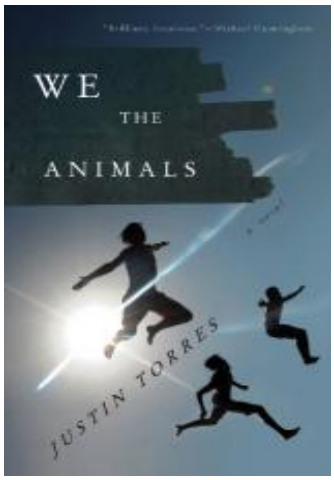
We the Animals

by Justin Torres



About the Book

An exquisite, blistering debut novel.

Three brothers tear their way through childhood --- smashing tomatoes all over each other, building kites from trash, hiding out when their parents do battle, tiptoeing around the house as their mother sleeps off her graveyard shift. Paps and Ma are from Brooklyn --- he?s Puerto Rican, she?s white --- and their love is a serious, dangerous thing that makes and unmakes a family many times.

Life in this family is fierce and absorbing, full of chaos and heartbreak and the euphoria of belonging completely to one another. From the intense familial unity felt by a child to the profound alienation he endures as he begins to see the world, this beautiful novel reinvents the coming-of-age story in a way that is sly and punch-in-the-stomach powerful.

Written in magical language with unforgettable images, this is a stunning exploration of the viscerally charged landscape of growing up, how deeply we are formed by our earliest bonds, and how we are ultimately propelled at escape velocity toward our futures.

Discussion Guide

1.How does the opening chapter, ?We Wanted More,? serve to introduce the rest of the novel? What do you learn about the narrator and his brothers?

2. Now look at the brothers individually --- who is Manny, Joel, the youngest brother? What sets them apart? At what point do you begin to see them separate? What separates them? Why doesn?t the youngest have a name?

3. Look at the three brothers as whole --- the ?we? of the title. What characterizes them as a whole? How do they operate as one unit? Why is it important that there are three?

4. What exactly is the animalistic nature of boys in general, and of these boys in particular? What are the different ways throughout the book that Torres compares the boys to animals? Are the other characters in the book --- their mother and father --- likened to animals, too? In what ways? Are we all animals?

5. Look at all the different names for the boys --- from the ones they give themselves, ?Muskateers,? ?monsters,? ?the magic of God? (p. 24-25), to the ones others give them, ?invaders, marauders, scavengers ? hideaways, fugitives, punks, cityslickers, bastards ? sweets, babies, innocents ? Animals? (p. 35, 37) --- and discuss the truth of these definitions, what words mean to these boys, how they come to discover who they are.

6. Look at the chapter ?Never-Never Time.? Do you see a connection to Never-Never Land in PETER PAN? Compare the brothers in WE THE ANIMALS to the Lost Boys in PETER PAN. What other elements and characters of the PETER PAN story are here?

7. ?That?s how it sometimes was with Ma; I needed to press myself against something cold and hard, or I?d get dizzy? (p. 13). Discuss the mother?s role in the story. What effect does she have on the men in her life? How does she operate as the lone female? What is her power? How and when does she choose to use or not use it?

8. ?Never-Never Time? and ?The Lake? both end with the celebration of life. Are the lives in WE THE ANIMALS joyful? Precarious? What makes life precious to them? In what ways are the characters living in extremes and what are those extremes?

9. Hunger is a theme throughout the novel. What are the different characters hungry for?

10. In what ways does violence appear and do work in the novel? How is violence related to the human and the animal? How is it tied to love? And does sex enter into these relationships as well? How are sex and violence intertwined?

11. How do the members of this family love each other? What is at stake in their loving and how do they show their affection and connection?

12. What separates the family from the rest of the community they live in? What prejudices do they experience?

13. ?I used to believe we could escape,? (p. 84) Manny says in ?Trash Kites.? Paps had resigned himself to the same in ?Night Watch? (p. 60), saying: ?We?re never gonna escape this.? What do they want to escape, exactly? And who else wants to escape? Why? And which, if any of them, can actually do it? What other books can you think of that deal with this kind of struggle?

14. How does WE THE ANIMALS both resemble and defy the classic coming-of-age novel?

15. Were you surprised by the ending? What do you think is happening in the last chapter? What does it mean that the other animals ?crown me prince of their rank jungles? (p. 125)?

Author Bio

Justin Torres is the author of BLACKOUTS, which won the 2023 National Book Award for Fiction, was a finalist for the *LA Times* Book Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Lambda Literary award, and the Southern California Book Award. A 2024 Guggenheim Fellow, he?s also received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and the New York Public Library?s Cullman Center. His first novel, WE THE ANIMALS, was a national bestseller and adapted into a feature film. He lives Los Angeles and is an associate professor of English at UCLA.

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