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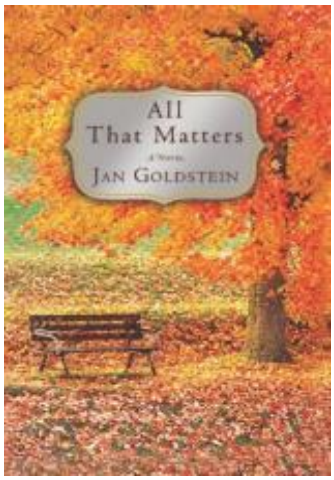
All That Matters: A Novel

by Jan Goldstein



About the Book

What's the greatest gift that one person can give another?

Jan Goldstein's stunning debut novel, **All That Matters**, is a deeply moving, endearing tale of a young woman who, with the help of her feisty grandmother, makes a journey from the very brink of death and despair into a full embrace of life.

Jennifer Stempler has nothing left to lose: the love of her life dumped her, her mother died in a senseless car accident five years ago, and her famous Hollywood producer father started a brand-new family -- with no room in it for her. So, 23-year-old Jennifer decides to pursue peaceful (permanent) oblivion on the beach near her home in Venice, California, drifting on a lethal combination of Xanax and tequila. But she can't even get that right.

Jennifer's depression is no match for her Nana's determination. Gabby Zuckerman refuses to let her granddaughter self-destruct. With promises made to Jennifer's father and doctors, Gabby whisks Jennifer back to her home in New York City, intending to prove to Jennifer that her life cannot possibly be over yet. In fact, it has just begun. Through jaunts in Central Park to road trips to Maine, Gabby teaches Jennifer how to trust and hope again. And by relating her own tragic and heroic experience during the Nazi occupation of Poland, Gabby bestows upon Jennifer an understanding of her own life's value. But when Gabby reveals a secret -- one that proves to be Jennifer's toughest challenge yet -- Jennifer struggles to find out whether the gift will sustain her.

Combining the unabashedly heartwarming sentiment of Robert James Waller's The Bridges of Madison County or Nicholas Sparks's **Message in a Bottle** with the irreverent humor of Jennifer Weiner's **In Her Shoes**, Goldstein's **All That Matters** is an inspirational first novel that leads readers to the core of what matters in life -- family, hope, and savoring each moment.

Discussion Guide

1. Describe Jennifer. Why does Jennifer feel life is not worth living? By attempting suicide, what is she trying to prove, and to whom is she trying to prove it? What does she mean when she says, "suicide is not an act of confusion, but of clarity?" Discuss what you might say to Jennifer about this statement, and why.

2. Describe Gabby. Why is Gabby the "last person" Jennifer wants to see when she wakes up in the hospital?

3. At the end of Chapter 8, to what does Gabby refer when she says "Jennifer is missing everything that really matters?" What does Gabby mean? What are some of the reasons or excuses that Jennifer might offer if she could acknowledge why she is missing what matters?

4. Consider Gabby's questions, "What kind of God takes a young mother and leaves an aging, unhealthy Grandmother?" Why do you think these things happen? How do they test one's spiritual and moral beliefs?

5. Looking at Chapter 20, what is happening with Jennifer? Share your impressions of Jennifer's parents and their role in her life. Why does Jennifer blame her mother for her own death? What do you think she is saying when she says, "Emotions steal your focus so that you can't see what's coming?" What emotions make her so fearful? Why does Jennifer use a video camera to see the world?

6. Recount Gabby's early life story. Looking at Chapter 21, what happened to her in the woods when she was ready to give up, after she left her neighbor's attic, during the Holocaust? What is the lesson that Mrs. Pulaski tells the young Gabby in Chapter 21? How is Gabby able to turn her own life into something meaningful?

7. How is Gabby's struggle during the Holocaust similar to Jennifer's struggle? What does Gabby share with her granddaughter that changes Jennifer's life? How does Gabby get through to Jennifer? Why is Jennifer able to hear what Gabby says when she wasn't ready before?

8. Think about Gabby sharing "everything" about the Holocaust with her daughter, Lili, and later with Jennifer. In your experience, is this typical for Holocaust survivors? Why do some talk about their experiences and some do not? Is it a protective device, or something else? Do you think it's important to talk about the Holocaust? Why?

9. In Chapter 26, discuss what Gabby means when she tells Jennifer, "we feel guilty when we don't think we are deserving of a reward or when we have caused harm to others." Share whether or not you can relate to this, and why. Why do Jennifer's rational words of comfort fail to mollify Gabby?

10. Trace Gabby's and Jennifer's road trip. Where do they go, and why? How does Gabby use the "letting go" ceremony on the rock in Maine to relinquish her self-guilt? How does this ceremony impact Jennifer? Are there rituals or acts you've witnessed that inspired you to action? How does letting go of her self-guilt allow Jennifer to make different choices about her life, to move on?

11. What's going on when Gabby collapses? Why does she collapse at this time? When Gabby and Jennifer are in Maine, what does the "voice" inside Jennifer tell her to do at the hospital? Whose "voice" is it?

12. If you are involved with people older or younger than yourself, share what each generation can give to the other. How is being involved with an older or younger person (family or not) affected your life?

13. Consider sharing the "gifts of the day" with those in your life. Is this something you do regularly? What are some of the "gifts" that you might share today if asked? Why is this important?

14. What is the significance of the title, **All That Matters**? What does it mean to you? What does author Jan Goldstein believe is "all that matters"?

15. Discuss what matters most to you. How has **All That Matters** changed or reinforced your own perceptions of what matters most?

Author Bio

A native New Englander, Jan Goldstein graduated with honors from the University of Vermont, garnering at that time a national award for his original musical Covenant from Broadcast Music, Inc. Jan went on to study in Jerusalem where he experienced first-hand the Yom Kippur war and its aftermath. Returning to the States, he went on to receive his Master's Degree and graduate awards for writing and public speaking.

Jan has penned a film on Einstein for Jon Voight and HBO and is the author of two works of nonfiction: **Life Can Be This Good** and **Sacred Wounds**. An award-winning poet, playwright, and screenwriter, Jan has been honored nationally by Johns Hopkins University and the U.S. Secretary of Education for his accomplishments.

As a human rights activist, Jan has spoken from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and at the Vietnam War Memorial. In addition, Jan has been named to the honorary board of A Place Called Home, a youth facility in South Central Los Angeles, along with Will and Jada Pinkett Smith and founder Debrah Constance.

For years, Jan was a single dad raising three young children, a challenging and exciting time during which he acquired invaluable experience, amongst which was the art of buying a training bra and learning to cook a Thanksgiving meal from scratch.

He continues to play rock music as he once did with his teen band, loves biking in Nantucket with his three-year-old daughter aboard, has a passion for chasing sunsets with his wife, and still believes the best maple syrup comes from Vermont.

Jan lives with his wife, Bonnie, a clinical psychologist, and their family in Los Angeles.

Critical Praise

"**All That Matters** is a compelling, deeply moving story of love, friendship, family, and second chances."

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