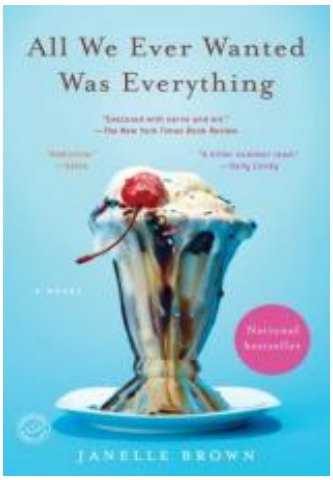
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

All We Ever Wanted Was Everything

by Janelle Brown



About the Book

When Paul Miller?s pharmaceutical company goes public, making his family IPO millionaires, his wife, Janice, is sure this is the windfall she?s been waiting for --- until she learns that her husband is leaving her and has cut her out of the new fortune. Meanwhile, 400 miles south in Los Angeles, the Millers? daughter, Margaret, has been dumped by her actor boyfriend and left in the lurch by an investor who promised to revive her irreverent postfeminist magazine, *Snatch*. Sliding toward bankruptcy and dogged by creditors, she flees for home, where her confused and lonesome teenage sister, Lizzie, is struggling with problems of her own: She?s become the school slut.

Holed up in their Georgian colonial bunker, the Miller women wage battle with divorce lawyers, debt collectors, drug-dealing pool boys, country club ladies, evangelical neighbors, and nasty social climbers --- and in the process all illusions and artifice fall away and they must reckon with something far scarier and more consequential: their true selves.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the epigraph by J.M. Barrie and its meaning in the novel. How are the notions of failure, success, and personal fulfillment examined in the book and are they complicated by the expectations of family, culture, and society?

2. This novel is centered on three very different women. Explore the concepts of femininity and feminism in the novel and the ways in which Janice, Margaret, and Lizzie reinforce and challenge those models.

3. Location plays an important part in the novel, magnifying and thwarting characters? aspirations. Examine the setting in this novel. What do Santa Rita, Los Angeles, Silicon Valley and California itself symbolize? Could this story take place anywhere else?

4. In the first chapter, Janice dreams of buying a piece of art with her new fortune: ?She covets a Van Gogh, one like

those she saw a few years back. The violence of the paint applied in furious layers so thick that she could see the impressions of the artist?s fingers, clawing at the canvas?she felt like she?d been slapped. The color! As vivid as a hallucination.? Is this object of desire an obvious one for Janice? What can we glean about Janice from her choice of a Van Gogh, in particular?

5. After he requests a divorce, Paul tells Janice, ?You don?t need me. You?ve never needed anyone in your life.? Do you find truth in Paul?s statement? Does Janice come across as completely self-reliant or hopelessly dependent? Or is Paul projecting his own feelings onto her, trying to justify leaving the marriage?

6. At the beginning of the novel, Janice and Margaret seem to be antagonists. Does this remain the case throughout the story? By the end of the novel, do Janice and Margaret merely understand each other, or have they grown more alike?

7. At first glance, Bart seems like an odd choice for Margaret?s affection. Why does she fall for him and how does she reconcile her love with her neofeminist principles?

8. The Miller women cope with their predicaments through various means?the accumulation of material objects, money, drugs, religion, ambition, and sex. How effective are these ultimately and what do they have in common?

9. After an unsuccessful and desperate attempt to score It, Janice races to the hospital to meet Margaret and Lizzie, who has just been released from the emergency room. The text reads, ?For the first time in longer than she can recall, [Janice] feels happy.? In many ways, this is such a low moment; explain what the author means.

10. All We Ever Wanted Was Everything is a satire. What or who is the object of the author?s critique? Some early readers likened the novel to the film *American Beauty*. Do you see a similarity between the two works? What is Janelle Brown?s message to her readers?

Author Bio

Janelle Brown is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels WHAT KIND OF PARADISE, I'LL BE YOU, PRETTY THINGS, WATCH ME DISAPPEAR, A

Her journalism and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Wired*, *Self*, *RealSimple*, *The Los Angeles* and numerous other publications. Previously, she worked as a senior writer at Salon and began her career as a staff writer at Wired

A native of San Francisco and graduate of UC Berkeley, she has since defected to Los Angeles, where she lives with her husband G

Critical Praise

"A withering Silicon Valley satire... From the ashes of their California dreams, the three [women] must learn to talk to each other instead of past each other, and build a new, slightly more realistic existence --- but not without doses of

revenge and hilarity. Brown's hip narrative reads like a sharp, contemporary twist on **The Corrections**."

All We Ever Wanted Was Everything

by Janelle Brown

Publication Date: May 12, 2009
Paperback: 448 pages
Publisher: Spiegel & Grau
ISBN-10: 0385524021
ISBN-13: 9780385524025