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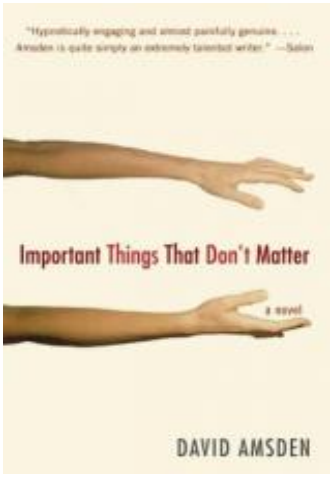
Important Things That Don't Matter: A Novel

by David Amsden



About the Book

Provocative, insightful, and darkly ironic, David Amsden's debut coming-of-age novel explores the complex and evolving relationship between a boy and his often absent father, Joe. As the boy grows up, he learns to ignore his father's flaws and irresponsible parenting as Joe brings him along to seedy bars, drug rendezvous, and to all of his girlfriends' apartments. These moments seem to wash over him, but as he gets older he finds they trickle up to the surface when he least expects them to -- often tweaking his ideas about women and sex. Now a twenty year old living in Manhattan, he must deal with these nagging thoughts of his past, and the questions that refuse to go away.

Discussion Guide

1. The protagonist's mother provides him with a sense of balance and normalcy throughout his childhood. She is the solid breadwinner and the morally sound parent who actually behaves like a parent. At one point he remarks, "I could just so clearly see that I was on my way to becoming Mom's kid completely. I was fine with this, because Mom's certainly a better example of pretty much everything than Dad ... " If the mother is doing such a fine job, why does the boy focus so much on his father?

2. The boy has his first sexual experience at a young age, with Claudia, whom he adores. But he pushes her away until she finally breaks up with him. Over the next few years, he often dwells on Claudia. Why?

3. The protagonist is fascinated by the blood from Claudia's broken hymen. Then he punctures his own skin to watch his own blood seep up from the wounds. Then his scabs come off in his girlfriend's bed and cover her linens with his blood. Why is the blood so alluring?

4. T.J. moves in and tries to play the role of older brother. The protagonist enjoys having an older male around, especially someone so cool who seems to have it all together. But soon T.J. begins making subtle advances. The condom

lesson in the bathroom is so painfully uncomfortable. The boy seems to just hold his breath until it's over, just trying to ignore what's happening. The section ends just as T.J. orders the boy to touch him. How far do you think it went? Does it seem to effect him later on in any way?

5. The boy suppresses so much, you would think none of his father's deficiencies bothered him. But when he does lash out, it's by making his father take him to the most expensive restaurant. But what angers him the most is when Melanie wants to call him her brother. Why did that one event unravel him the most?

6. When Joe tells his son he's going to name his newborn after him, his mother gets more upset than he does. Explain what she must have felt.

7. The boy has such a strong devotion to his mother, he often says he wants to protect that bond by not talking about it. How does his silence honor his relationship with his mother?

8. Why do you think that the protagonist is nameless throughout the story?

9. Joe's relationship with Mary and Melanie seems to bring out his latent paternal instinct. When Joe reaches out to his son to try to make things right, his Hallmark card sounds like something a legitimate, responsible father would write to his son. When Joe shows up to his son's New York City apartment, the protagonist notices that his father is starting to look like someone's dad. But during lunch, his father falls back into his drunken, tactless self again. Which do you think the protagonist resents more: the "legitimate" father or the unreliable father he's most accustomed to?

10. As mentioned, the protagonist has a good relationship with his mother, but an aloof one with all other women. The women he longs for are the ones he no longer has (Claudia, Liz). Why do you think he can't sustain normal relationships with women?

Author Bio

While a student in New York, David Amsden worked at the *New Yorker* and *New York* magazine, where he is now a contributing writer. He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York, where he is at work on another novel.

Critical Praise

"Absorbing...a daring narrative that resonates with the heartbreaking emotion that lurks between Amsden's sharply written lines."

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