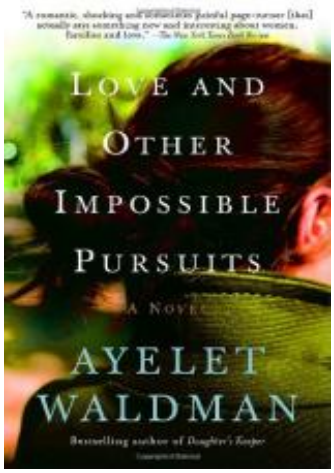
Love and Other Impossible Pursuits

by Ayelet Waldman



About the Book

With wry candor and tender humor, acclaimed novelist Ayelet Waldman has crafted a strikingly beautiful novel for our time, tackling the absurdities of modern life and reminding us why we love some people no matter what.

For Emilia Greenleaf, life is by turns a comedy of errors and an emotional minefield. Yes, she's a Harvard Law grad who married her soul mate. Yes, they live in elegant comfort on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. But with her one-and-only, Jack, came a stepson --- a know-it-all preschooler named William who has become her number one responsibility every Wednesday afternoon. With William, Emilia encounters a number of impossible pursuits --- such as the pursuit of cab drivers who speed away when they see William's industrial-strength car seat and the pursuit of lactose-free, strawberry-flavored, patisserie-quality cupcakes, despite the fact that William's allergy is a figment of his over-protective mother's imagination.

As much as Emilia wants to find common ground with William, she becomes completely preoccupied when she loses her newborn daughter. After this, the sight of any child brings her to tears, and Wednesdays with William are almost impossible. When his unceasing questions turn to the baby's death, Emilia is at a total loss. Doesn't anyone understand that self-pity is a full-time job? Ironically, it is only through her blundering attempts to bond with William that she finally heals herself and learns what family really means.

Discussion Guide

1. What were your initial impressions of Emilia? In what way did your image of her change as you learned more about her? As she narrates, is she always honest with us and with herself? How does she balance humor and intensity when describing what it's like to be a woman on the edge?

2. Discuss the many forms of love described in the novel. Is love ever a truly impossible pursuit? What factors make it

seem that way to Emilia?

3. How does Emilia cope with being a pariah among the other preschool parents? What are the criteria within this community for determining whether a woman is a "good mother"? What purpose does their competitive attitude serve? What does Sonia seem to think about the culture of American mommyhood?

4. What does Emilia's own mother teach her about being a parent? How does Emilia's mom compare to Jack's mother, from Syria?

5. Discuss the author's choice of New York, and Central Park in particular, as the backdrop for much of the novel. How does Emilia perceive the wonders and dangers of this locale? What fragments of her childhood can she revive in the park?

6. Is the tension between Jack and Emilia solely related to the loss of Isabel and the presence of a testy ex-wife? How might the early months of their marriage have gone in the absence of such agonies? Did their relationship change very much as they went from being lovers to being spouses?

7. What seems to account for the vast differences between Emilia and her sister Allison? Out of the many parenting styles presented in the novel, which seems to be the ideal? In what way are parenting styles reflections of an adult's overall outlook on life, as much as his or her concern for a child? How do you personally determine when a level of caution has become irrational and unrealistic?

8. What do you make of William's seemingly nonchalant response to tragedy, such as loudly announcing the absence of the Twin Towers while crossing the Brooklyn Bridge? What do children see (or not see) compared to adults? What did you make of his attempts to draw a family picture, and his depiction of Isabel as an angel?

9. Do you agree with Jack's assertion that Emilia married him because she was trying to become her father? Do you believe his statement that he married Carolyn because he loved her? Do you agree with his friends who believe that age had everything to do with his attraction to Emilia? What ultimately is the basis for deep romantic attraction?

10. What keeps Emilia from experiencing the Walk to Remember in the same way that the other families experience it? Does the walk nonetheless have healing results for her?

11. After her blowout argument with Jack, Emilia takes refuge in her best friend, Simon, and a jaunt to Barneys. What makes her friendship with Simon such a lasting one? Why is she in some ways more comfortable with him than with Mindy? Why is Simon the ideal person to accompany her while she faces her new waistline while shopping?

12. How significant is Judaism to Emilia's identity? How do she and William contend with issues of spiritual traditions? What other elements shape Emilia's sense of self?

13. How would you characterize Emilia's father? Do you empathize with his ex-wife's desire to rekindle a romance with him?

14. Do Emilia and William share any common personality traits? Is she genuinely reckless or insensitive to his needs?

Why is it so easy for Jack to believe the accusations that Emilia is not fit to care for his son?

15. What motivates Carolyn to provide Emilia with pathological evidence that Isabel's cause of death was Sudden Infant Death Syndrome? Were you happy to see Carolyn achieve happiness in the end, with a man who seems suited to her and a baby on the way?

16. Emilia gets her hands on numerous guides to step-parenting and even pays a visit to William's therapist. What wisdom does **Love and Other Impossible Pursuits** offer stepparents?

17. At the end of the novel, Emilia confirms her father's advice about rational thinking; she says that mystical ideas and hopes interfered with her marriage to Jack. Do you agree with her? Is the concept of *bashert*, the notion of "meant-to-be," unrealistic?

Author Bio

Ayelet Waldman is the author of A PERFECT HAND, A REALLY GOOD DAY, LOVE AND TREASURE, RED HOOK ROAD, LOVE AND OTHER IMPOSSIBLE PURSUITS, DAUGHTER'S KEEPER, BAD MOTHER and the *Mommy-Track Mystery* series. She co-developed and was an Executive Producer on the Netflix series "Unbelievable," which received a Peabody Award and Best Limited Series nominations at the Critics? Choice Awards, the Golden Globes, and the Primetime Emmys in 2020. Waldman lives in Berkeley, California with her husband, Michael Chabon.

Critical Praise

"I thought the heroine was a great accomplishment? . . . And William is a triumph."

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