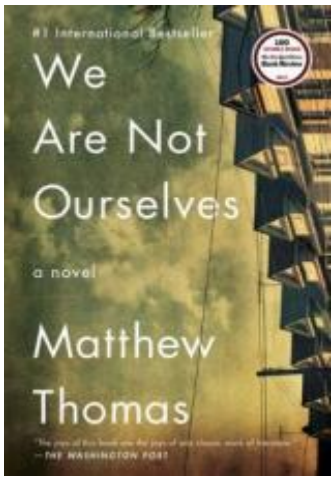
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We Are Not Ourselves

by Matthew Thomas



About the Book

Born in 1941, Eileen Tumulty is raised by her Irish immigrant parents in Woodside, Queens, in an apartment where the mood swings between heartbreak and hilarity, depending on whether guests are over and how much alcohol has been consumed.

When Eileen meets Ed Leary, a scientist whose bearing is nothing like those of the men she grew up with, she thinks she?s found the perfect partner to deliver her to the cosmopolitan world she longs to inhabit. They marry, and Eileen quickly discovers Ed doesn?t aspire to the same, ever bigger, stakes in the American Dream.

Eileen encourages her husband to want more: a better job, better friends, a better house, but as years pass it becomes clear that his growing reluctance is part of a deeper psychological shift. An inescapable darkness enters their lives, and Eileen and Ed and their son Connell try desperately to hold together a semblance of the reality they have known, and to preserve, against long odds, an idea they have cherished of the future.

Discussion Guide

1. Thomas begins his novel with two epigraphs, one from Stanley Kunitz and one from *King Lear*. Did the epigraphs inform your reading of the novel? How did they relate to each of the members of the Leary family? Why do you think Thomas chose to use the phrase *we are not ourselves*, taken from the *King Lear* epigraph, as the title of his novel?

2. When Eileen is growing up, she?s aware that ?men were always quieting down around her father? (pp. 3?4), whom ?everybody called?Big Mike? (p. 6). Describe Big Mike. Why does he command so much respect from the outside world? Does this influence Eileen?s behavior? In what ways? How does Big Mike?s legend compare with the reality of what he is like when he is at home with Eileen and her mother?

3. Even after Eileen buys the apartment building from the Orlando family, she?s obsessed with the idea of owning her own house. Why is this so important for Eileen?

4. When Eileen enters nursing school ?she knew that even if nursing wasn?t the field she?d have chosen, she?d been training for it without meaning to from an early age? (p. 38). Describe Eileen?s childhood. How have Eileen?s experiences with her mother helped prepare her for the job? Occasionally Eileen feels the instructors are ?treating her with something like professional courtesy? (p. 38), and it makes her think of the way men in the neighborhood treat her father. Why? And why does this make her uneasy?

5. When Ed turns down an offer to be the chairman of his department, he tells Eileen, ?It?s all about having the right ambition? (p. 85). What does Ed think the ?right? ambitions are? Why is Eileen so upset that he has turned down the job? How does his ambition conflict with Eileen?s?

6. After Ed has lost his temper and ?flipped out? on Connell, Eileen tells him that ?it had better not [happen again]. I don?t give a damn what your father did to you. That boy?s not him? (p. 186). Why do you think Ed is so reticent to talk about his relationship with his own father? Does Ed?s relationship with his father inform his parenting style with Connell? If so, in what ways?

7. On moving day, when Eileen arrives at her new house, ?Her first thought as she took in the house through the window as that it didn?t look the way she?d remembered it? (p. 278). Contrast Eileen?s memory of her new house with the reality of what it looks like. What accounts for the change in the way that Eileen views the house? Why is she so baffled when her movers ask her where they should place her belongings within it?

8. Connell attends one of Ed?s classes in order to complete a school assignment. Describe Connell?s experience in the classroom. Although Connell is unnerved by his time in Ed?s classroom, he keeps his word to Ed and decides not to tell his mother how strange it had been. Why do you think Connell chooses to keep this information to himself? Do you agree with his decision to do so? When Ed apologizes to Connell, Connell tells him, ?It?s all right?I already know what kind of teacher you are. You teach me every day? (p. 162). How does Ed teach his son?

9. Who is Bethany? Do you think her friendship with Eileen is healthy? Why or why not? Why does Eileen agree to accompany Bethany to the faith healer? Compare and contrast Eileen?s experiences with Vywamus with her experience going to a therapist. Why does Eileen think that going to the faith healer is ?better than therapy? (p. 444)? Do you think going to the faith healer has helped Eileen? How?

10. Ed is reluctant to attend a party with Eileen at the home of one of her colleagues and tells her, ?They?ll never know the real me? (p. 393). What does he mean? Were you surprised by Ed?s diagnosis? Were there any instances of foreshadowing in the novel that led you to anticipate what Ed?s illness was? What were they? Who do you think is ?the real? Ed?

11. When Connell tells his friend Farshid that he and his family will be moving and expresses reticence about it, Farshid tells him, ?You just need to reinvent yourself? (p. 240). Do you agree with Connell that ?I have to invent myself before I can reinvent myself?? (p. 240). Why does Connell tell his mother that he wants to move even though he?s ambivalent about the prospect? What does moving into a new house mean to each member of the Leary family?

12. When it comes to dating, Eileen would ?rather be alone than end up with a man who was afraid? (p. 51). What traits is Eileen looking for in a partner? How does Ed measure up to Eileen?s ideal partner? Were you surprised that she ends up marrying him? Eileen sees them as ?coconspirators in a mission of normalcy? (p. 124). What does she mean? Describe their relationship. How does it evolve?

13. After Ed gets sick, Connell avoids going back home. Why is he so afraid of going home? Connell tells Eileen that caring for Ed is ?too hard for me. It?s too much? and that ?I?m not you?That?s the problem right there? (p. 466). How does Eileen react? Is she justified? Compare and contrast the way that both Eileen and Connell deal with their sick parents. In what ways, if any, are they alike?

14. After Ed?s diagnosis, Eileen takes ?a third path, the pragmatic one. It hadn?t happened for a reason, by they would find something to glean from it anyway? (p. 382). What does Eileen?s reaction tell us about her character? Describe your first impression of Eileen. Did you like her initially? Did your impression of Eileen change as you read on? In what ways and why?

15. Eileen?s mother tells her, ?Don?t ever love anyone. All you?ll do is break your own heart? (p. 12). Why does she offer this advice to Eileen? In what ways has Eileen?s mother?s heart been broken? Do any of the other characters in WE ARE NOT OURSELVES suffer heartbreaks? What has caused those instances of suffering?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Baseball is important in the Leary household. Ed and Connell relate to each other through the sport. When Eileen goes to a game with Ed and Connell, she realizes that ?she did some of her best thinking at ball games, or while Ed was listening to them on the radio? (p. 172). Watch a baseball game with your book club. Discuss why Eileen might find watching games calming. Did the experience have the same effect on you?

2. When Eileen is a young girl, her father takes her to visit friends in Jackson Heights and she feels an amazing sense of peace because ?the people who lived in this building had figured out something important about life, and she?d stumbled upon their secret. There were places, she now saw, that contained more happiness than ordinary places did? (pp. 15?16). What is it about the building that feels exceptionally special to Eileen? Are there any places like that in your life? What makes them so important to you? Share your thoughts with your book club.

3. When Matthew Thomas sold WE ARE NOT OURSELVES for publication, it was major industry news. Read more about it here and here.

4. Go on a virtual walking tour of Queens, New York, by clicking here, to learn more about the neighborhoods where Eileen grows up and where she raises Connell. Eileen knows ?it was possible to see the changes as part of what made the city great?but only if you weren?t the one being displaced? (p. 128). Talk about how Eileen reacts to the changes in Jackson Heights with your book club. Were you surprised? Explain your answer.

Author Bio

Matthew Thomas was born in the Bronx and grew up in Queens. A graduate of the University of Chicago, he has an MA from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University and an MFA from the University of California, Irvine, where he received the Graduate Essay Award. He lives with his wife and twin children in New Jersey. WE ARE NOT OURSELVES is his first novel.

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Publication Date: June 2, 2015
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 656 pages
Publisher: Simon & Schuster
ISBN-10: 1476756678
ISBN-13: 9781476756677