

What We Have: A Family's Inspiring Story About Love, Loss, and Survival

by Amy Boesky



About the Book

The stirring true story of a woman who chose fearlessness in the face of a fatal family legacy and discovered the pleasure of living each moment to its fullest.

At 32, Amy Boesky thought she had it all figured out: a wonderful new man in her life, a great job, and the (nearly) perfect home. For once, she was almost able to shake the terrible fear that had gripped her for as long as she could remember. Women in her family had always died young --- from cancer --- and she and her sisters had grown up in time's shadow. It colored every choice they made and was beginning to come to a head now that each of them approached 35 --- the deadline their doctors prescribed for having preventive surgery with the hope they could thwart their family's medical curse. But Amy didn't want to dwell on that now. She wanted to plan for a new baby, live her life. And with the appreciation for life's smallest pleasures, she did just that. In **What We Have**, Amy shares a deeply transformative year in her family's life and invites readers to join in their joy, laughter, and grief.

In a true story as compelling as the best in women's fiction, written with the sagacity of Joan Didion and the elegance of Amy Bloom, Amy Boesky's journey celebrates the promise of a full life, even in the face of uncertainty.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you agree with Amy's decision to decline testing for the BRCA1 mutation? Why or why not? What factors do you think contributed to this? Does the history of the relationships among the sisters become a factor here?
2. What do you think about the three sisters' decision to have both prophylactic oophorectomies and mastectomies? Would you have made the same choice?

3. With the advent of at-home genome sequencing, we will very soon have the ability to know about illnesses that might affect us down the road. Do you think it's better to know or not to know?
4. Discuss the different layers of meaning in the title of Amy's memoir. Amy and her husband Jacques are in almost constant opposition with regard to planning for the future.
5. With whom do you most identify? Is it better to take preemptive action or to take things as they come?
6. Knowing that hereditary cancers tend to strike approximately ten years earlier with each succeeding generation, what do you think would be the best way for Amy to prepare her daughters?
7. How did Amy's historical information about timepieces and her reflections on the regular calendar versus the "Cancer Calendar" affect the story?
8. When Amy returns to teaching after Sacha is born, she writes, "I watched Sacha crawl into Annabel's open arms with a bitter taste in my mouth. There's nothing generous about love, I decided" (p. 260). Are there any other instances in the book to which this sentiment could apply?
9. What is the function of the "forever house" and Amy and Jacques's journey to find it?
10. To paraphrase Amy's own exam question: how does the author define herself "in opposition to an "other" or antagonist" (p. 52)? Think about what she includes in her self-representation as well as what she leaves out.
11. After Amy loses her mother, she attempts to keep "bomma's" memory alive for her two daughters --- repeating her own parents' attempts to keep Sylvia alive for her and her sisters. Are the benefits of preserving family memories worth the risk that the girls might come to dwell on their forbears' early deaths?
12. Discuss some examples of how Amy's love of language and wordplay helps her process difficult feelings and experiences. Have you ever relied upon a similar device?
13. Has hereditary illness played a role in your personal history? How do Amy's experiences resonate with your own?

Author Bio

Amy Boesky is an associate professor of English at Boston College. She has degrees from Harvard and Oxford, and has written several books for children and young adults. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and two daughters.

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