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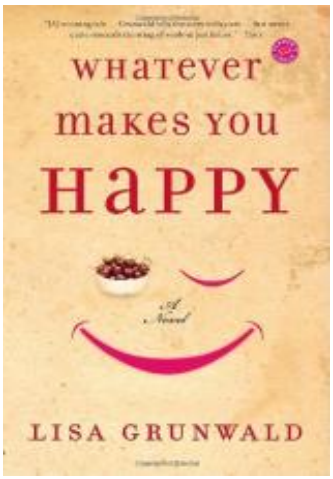
Whatever Makes You Happy: A Novel

by Lisa Grunwald



About the Book

What does it take to be happy? How happy is happy enough? And what does "happy" mean, anyway? So asks Sally Farber-wife, mother, daughter, friend, working woman, and lover-in this wise and funny novel about a woman's search for happiness in some of the right, and a few of the wrong, places.

Summer in the city looms long for Sally Farber when she sends her two daughters off to camp for the first time. Suddenly freed of her usual patterns in a city that becomes a grown-up's playground,, she embarks on a journey unlike any she's ever had-filled with guilty pleasures and guilty pains.

Caught between the past (cleaning out her childhood apartment as her demanding mother offers edicts from South Carolina) and the future (facing her first semi-empty nest), Sally finds herself unexpectedly involved with a powerful, unpredictable man.

And as she researches a book whose very topic is happiness, she must weigh the relative merits of prescriptions for its attainment offered by Aristotle and the Dalai Lama, Freud and Charles Schulz, scented candles and Zoloft, her mother and her best friend. The answer comes, in the end, from a surprising discovery, in this rich and original novel about how we can find, and ultimately embrace, both happiness and love.

Discussion Guide

1. At one point in the novel, Michael tells Sally that happiness is "this moment." What is T.J.'s definition of happiness? What is Lucas's definition? Do you have a personal definition of happiness?

2. Grunwald uses beach glass as a metaphor to describe Sally's own definition of happiness. What is the difference between Sally's beach glass and Michael's "this moment"?

3. What is this book trying to say about happiness?

4. What, if anything, does Sally gain from her affair with Lucas? Why does she pursue him-or allow herself to be pursued-in the first place?

5. One of the quotes in the book is from Victor Hugo, who said, "The greatest happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved." Does this maxim hold true in the novel? Do you believe that being loved is a requirement for happiness?

6. What is the importance of the death of Sally's father to the rest of the story? What is the connection between loss and happiness, in the book, and in life?

7. Sally's two children are very different from one another, in terms of how outwardly happy they seem. Are some people are born happy and others born unhappy? Do you think there is, as in dieting, a happiness "set point," a basic level of happiness or unhappiness to which individuals gravitate?

8. Do you think that the book has a happy ending?

9. Do you think of happiness as a luxury? Do you think of it as a right? Is our culture too obsessed with the idea of happiness?

10. When you hear the word "happiness," what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Author Bio

Lisa Grunwald is the author of seven novels, including TIME AFTER TIME, THE IRRESISTIBLE HENRY HOUSE and THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING. Along with her husband, former Reuters editor-in-chief Stephen Adler, she edited the anthologies THE MARRIAGE BOOK, WOMEN'S LETTERS and LETTERS OF THE CENTURY. Grunwald is an occasional essayist and runs a side hustle called ProcrastinationArts, where she sells the other things she makes with pencils and paper. She lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

"From Aristotle to Edith Wharton, from laughter therapy to bedoom farce, this novel is a dictionary of delights."

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