



© Margo Silver

# ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING

"A razor-sharp critique of the absurd expectations that, these days, have come to stand for ambition, *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* is wrenching, riveting, and still manages to be great fun. This is a wise, intimate chronicle of one family's struggle to take off their masks and live in the place they most feared: the real, imperfect world."

—MEGHAN DAUM, author of *The Quality of Life Report*

"Janelle Brown's beautiful debut explores the tiny fissures in our lives and what happens when those fissures erupt into chasms. Excruciatingly funny, unrelentingly painful—this extraordinary book gives us something only the best novels can: a glimpse of what it means to be human."

—KATHERINE TAYLOR, author of *Rules for Saying Goodbye*



Hardcover • ISBN 978-0-385-52401-8

Also available as a Random House eBook • ISBN 978-0-385-52689-0

Also available as a Random House Audio CD • ISBN 978-0-7393-5826-9

Also available as a Random House Audio download • ISBN 978-0-7393-5827-6

For other Reading Group Companions, visit us at: [www.randomhouse.com/rgg/](http://www.randomhouse.com/rgg/)

*All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* Readers' Guide, Copyright 2008 by the Doubleday Publishing Group A division of Random House, Inc.

SPI  
EGE  
L&G  
RAU

[www.spiegelandgrau.com](http://www.spiegelandgrau.com)

# ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING

## JANELLE BROWN A NOVEL



"Brown's hip narrative reads like a sharp, contemporary twist on *The Corrections*." —PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"Rarely does a first novelist write with such confidence and grace. *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* is a marvelous book."

—AYELET WALDMAN,

author of *Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*

**JANELLE BROWN** is a freelance journalist who writes for *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *Wired*, *Elle*, and *Self*, among other publications, and was formerly a senior writer for Salon.com. She lives with her husband in Los Angeles. This is her first novel.

Visit Janelle's website at: [www.janellebrown.com](http://www.janellebrown.com)

## INTRODUCTION

When Paul Miller's pharmaceutical company goes public, making his family IPO millionaires, his wife, Janice, is sure this is the windfall she's been waiting years for—until she learns, via messengered letter, that her husband is divorcing her (for her tennis partner!) and cutting her out of the new fortune. Meanwhile, four hundred miles south in Los Angeles, the Millers' older daughter, Margaret, has been dumped by her newly famous actor boyfriend and left in the lurch by an investor who promised to revive her fledgling post-feminist magazine, *Snatch*. Sliding toward bankruptcy and dogged by creditors, she flees for home where her younger sister Lizzie, 14, is struggling with problems of her own. Formerly chubby, Lizzie has been enjoying her newfound popularity until some bathroom graffiti alerts her to the fact that she's become the school slut.

The three Miller women retreat behind the walls of their Georgian colonial to wage battle with divorce lawyers, debt collectors, drug-dealing pool boys, mean girls, country club ladies, evangelical neighbors, their own demons, and each other, and in the process they become achingly sympathetic characters we can't help but root for, even as the world they live in epitomizes everything wrong with the American Dream. Exhilarating, addictive, and superbly accomplished, *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* crackles with energy and intelligence and marks the debut of a knowing and very funny novelist, wise beyond her years.

When you read *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* you'll immediately want your friends to read it so you have someone to talk to about it. It's our hope that this guide will help spark a lively conversation that will continue long after you've turned the last page.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Discuss the epigraph by J. M. Barrie and its meaning in the novel. How are the notions of failure, success, and personal fulfillment examined in the book and are they complicated by the expectations of family, culture, and society?
- 2 This novel is centered on three very different women. Explore the concepts of femininity and feminism in the novel and the ways in which Janice, Margaret, and Lizzie reinforce and challenge those models.
- 3 Location plays an important part in the novel, magnifying and thwarting characters' aspirations. Examine the setting in this novel. What do Santa Rita, Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, and California itself symbolize? Could this story take place anywhere else?
- 4 In the first chapter, Janice dreams of buying a piece of art with her new fortune—"she covets a Van Gogh, one like those she saw a few years back. The violence of the paint applied in furious layers so thick that she could see the impressions of the artist's fingers, clawing at the canvas—she felt like she'd been slapped. The color! As vivid as a hallucination." Is this object of desire an obvious one for Janice? What can we glean about Janice from her choice of a Van Gogh, in particular?
- 5 After he requests a divorce, Paul tells Janice, "You don't need me. You've never needed anyone in your life." Do you find there is truth in Paul's statement? Does Janice come across as completely self-reliant or hopelessly dependent? Or is Paul projecting his own feelings onto her, trying to justify leaving the marriage?
- 6 At the beginning of the novel, Janice and Margaret seem to be antagonists. Does this remain the case throughout the story? By the end of the novel, do Janice and Margaret merely understand each other, or have they grown more alike?
- 7 At first glance, Bart seems like an odd choice for Margaret's affection. Why does she fall for him and how does she reconcile her love with her neo-feminist principles?
- 8 The Miller women cope with their predicaments through various means—the accumulation of material objects, money, drugs, religion, ambition, and sex. How effective are these ultimately and what do they have in common?
- 9 After an unsuccessful and desperate attempt to score *it*, Janice races to the hospital to meet Margaret and Lizzie, who has just been released from the emergency room. The text reads, "For the first time in longer than she can recall, [Janice] feels happy." In many ways, this is such a low moment; explain what the author means.
- 10 *All We Ever Wanted Was Everything* is a satire. What or who is the object of the author's critique? Some early readers likened the novel to the film *American Beauty*. Do you see a similarity between the two works? What is Janelle Brown's message to her readers?



ALL WE EVER WANTED WAS EVERYTHING

a  
novel  
by

JANELLE BROWN