

Everyone She Loved Reading Group Guide

Introduction

Penelope Cameron has convinced her husband and four friends to sign an unusual pact. If Penelope should die before her daughters turn eighteen, her husband, Joey, cannot remarry without the consent of her sister and three best friends. Then, the unthinkable happens, and Penelope's family and friends must struggle to live life without her.

Penelope's young daughters, her husband, and friends are slowly rebuilding new lives when the fragile serenity they have gained is suddenly threatened. Penelope's distant cousins are eager to gain control of the family money, and ruthlessly plant seeds of doubt and distrust among the friends. They must pull together and trust each other, as more than their friendships are now at stake.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Even though she is young and healthy, Penelope has a premonition that her life will be cut short. With this in mind, she makes her family and friends sign a document that prevents her husband Joey from marrying "the wrong woman"; her sister and friends must approve of his marriage. Do you agree with Penelope's actions? Do you think it is fair to Joey to have his future determined by his wife's sister and her friends?
2. What did Lucy sacrifice in her friendship with Penelope? Did Penelope give Lucy anything in return, either tangible or emotional? Do you agree with Lucy's decision to repress her feelings for Joey?
3. As the story opens, everyone is worried about Tessa's weight and her refusal to eat. What are Tessa's reasons for not eating? What role does food play in Tessa's feelings about her mother's death?
4. Siobhan is a woman who has structured her life around discipline and order, after growing up in a household where she had none. Is her plan to treat Tessa for anorexia through rules and regulations a result of her sincere desire to help Joey and the girls, or is she hiding an ulterior motive?
5. The four friends in the novel have very different relationships to the men in their life. Penelope considered Joey "quite the catch," and seemed to have a flawless marriage. Susannah had nothing in common with her ex-husband except sexual chemistry, which is why they are still sleeping together. Martha believes her husband Sateesh's many attractive qualities are wasted on her, while Lucy has spent years ignoring her attraction to Joey. How do the way these women relate to their husbands and lovers differ? Do their separate philosophies reflect a deeper understanding of love and marriage?

6. The women in the book all come from families with turbulent relationships. Penelope's father remarried a much younger woman; Martha's mother suffers from serious depression; Lucy's mother always encouraged her daughter's artistic talent, while Siobhan grappled with her parents neglect. How do their childhood experiences manifest themselves in their adult lives?

7. Siobhan reads Penelope's private files on her computer, unbeknownst to Joey. She immediately comes to the conclusion that Penelope was cheating on Joey. On page 211 she suspects Lucy of possibly harming Joey's daughters. Do you believe her "soul was brimming with moral courage and not a whiff of spite"—or do you think Siobhan's actions are motivated by her own desires?

8. Joey confronts Lucy about the note he believes his wife wrote to her many years ago (p. 237). Lucy thinks he's talking about keeping Tessa's lunchtime activities a secret from him. How does their relationship cause their misunderstanding in this scene? Are Joey's conclusions rational, or are they a result of other, unexplored feelings?

9. As Tessa continues to struggle to eat enough food, her sister June is falling prey to similar destructive habits. Discuss June's evolution through the book, as she goes from enjoying her food to locking herself in the bathroom and forcing herself to throw up. What finally pushes June over the edge?

10. Nigel and Peter Cameron are desperate to gain sole control of the Cameron Foundation's finances. They install Siobhan in Joey's house to gather information, and then are gleeful when they learn Joey is bringing Penelope's friends to arbitration regarding Penelope's will. Why do they think they are assured victory no matter what is decided?

11. Lucy goes into a self-admitted "blind panic" when it comes to money matters. She avoids answering the phone for fear it is bill collectors, and she jeopardizes her house by entering into a shady financial deal. Why is Lucy so bad with money? Do you know people in your own life who act in a similar manner?

12. Discuss Martha's reasons behind keeping the events in Phoenix a secret from Lucy and Sateesh. Are her actions understandable? How do you think they influenced her relationship to Sateesh and her perceived role in the marriage?

13. After Martha finally confesses to Joey, he runs over to apologize and explain everything to Lucy. However, it doesn't go as planned and Lucy doesn't jump into his open arms. Why not? What are Lucy's reasons for remaining aloof from Joey?

14. Penelope's love and friendship for Lucy, Martha, and Susannah continues to affect the women even after her death. What sacrifices were made by these four women for each other and how did it affect their friendship? Did those sacrifices necessarily make the friendship stronger?

A Conversation with Sheila Curran

1. How did you get the idea for this novel?

Everyone She Loved was conceived in the front seat of my friend's car. We were discussing an article I'd written about two young girls in Arizona whose parents had died within months of each other. From there we talked about difficult it would be to chose which couple among one's siblings and friends would best be suited for the job of raising our children. (Where did one couple's permissiveness slide into overindulgence, another's consistency into unbearable strictness?) The idea of dying was hard enough, but figuring out which couple would most love your kids in your absence? Intolerable.

We paused in our conversation just long enough for my brain to settle on yet another catastrophic possibility. "You know what would be worse?" I asked. "What if I died and John (my husband) married someone awful? I'd have no control at all!"

Another pause. "Unless," I continued. "I could get him to agree that *if* he remarried, my sisters and friends would check out the bride. Make sure she wasn't some kind of wicked stepmother in hiding."

Did you know at the start that you wanted to address particular issues?

Not really. I just had this character in mind, a lovable charming and funny woman who could talk people into seeing things her way, even when her way is slightly over-the-top and outrageous.

2. You grew up for a time in the South, but ended up moving around a lot. Do you consider yourself a Southerner?

Because we moved so often, I never feel like an insider, no matter where I live. Technically, I've lived in the South long enough to say I belong, but I have a feeling a *real* southerner can count her granddaddy's granddaddy's people having come from the same place so far back there are quill marks naming the town in the family bible.

3. Would you ever create or sign a codicil like the one Penelope draws up for her husband?

This is the sixty-four thousand dollar question. What intrigues me about this codicil is it's so *wrong* and yet, so *right*. If you're thinking about young children, who could you imagine to better protect them than your most trusted girlfriend? And yet, how would I feel if my husband asked me to sign a similar document but where the committee was made up of his best friends? Suddenly I can imagine feeling just the slightest bit uncomfortable. Insulted even!

4. One of the driving issues of the novel is Tessa's eating disorder. What kind of research did you do to understand this illness, and what would you like your readers to take from Tessa's plight?

I've known three teenage anorectics, all children of close friends. One of those girls has grown up to earn a master's degree in Nutrition from Tufts University. She's been extremely generous in sharing her story and her insights with me. I also read scores of books and articles on eating disorders and consulted a psychologist friend at FSU when I had questions I couldn't answer on my own. What's most important to understand is that anorexia is very complicated. It's not so simple as "thin people thinking they're fat." There's a whole system of cues and triggers that become obsessive and oppressive. Clearly it has something to do with control, but it's not easy to decipher or to treat.

5. Siobhan is one of the most complex characters in the book. What were your feelings for her as you were writing the book? Ultimately, how would you like your readers to judge Siobhan?

Siobhan is limited by her need to create a perfectly-controlled universe. Everything bad that's happened to her has been used as justification for not trusting anyone else, and for putting up defenses. She's bent on being perfect, on not breaking rules, but what she doesn't understand is that by shutting herself off from compassion, she's ultimately the loser. Without empathy, and humility, it's impossible to grow, to experience grace, much less wonder. I just keep thinking of bark on a plant that's gotten so thick, nothing can make it's way through, not sunlight, not water.

6. You grew up in a family of 10 kids. How did that affect the way you wrote about Tessa and June's relationship?

It just seems natural to me, to recreate the bond between sisters.

Do you have a close sibling relationship like they do?

Absolutely. We're all close in different ways, but there is a certain protectiveness I feel for my siblings, and they for me. We also suffered through my brother Tommy's death, and I think that made us tighter as a group and more likely to treasure our time together.

7. What kind of research did you do for the financial fraud plotline in the book?

When I was thinking about the South, and my characters, I was driving back and forth from Tallahassee to Atlanta quite a bit. Every small town I went through seemed to have the same oversized billboards or banners across storefronts: huge, technicolored and often, the only sign of life on the street: TITLE LOANS! PAYDAY LOANS! When I began researching these 'industries' on the Web, I found out how pernicious the loan terms were, and how trapped the customer becomes in a cycle of debt. From there I became fascinated in 'fine print' and how it can represent all these obligations that have become woven together over time.

Was this a part of the book when you initially began writing?

Yes. I finished the novel in June of 2007, well before the subprime crisis was a household word.

Did the current economic crisis influence you at all? Well, when I used to talk about the research I was doing, I think people thought I was exaggerating the extent to which people could be duped into signing documents they couldn't understand. Most signers assumed that these contracts wouldn't be standard unless they'd been vetted by lots of consumers before them. It turns out, the terms were being ratcheted up over time without anyone making a fuss about them. I do remember Alan Greenspan saying fairly recently that even with his knowledge, he found mortgages almost impenetrably difficult to understand.

8. How do you see Lucy's character evolving through the story? Lucy is intuitive and empathetic to a fault. When Penelope was killed, she was so busy worrying about the girls and Joey, she put her own needs on a back burner. She took out a mortgage so that she could shut down her bed-and-breakfast, and at that time, in her state of shock and grief, it was impossible to imagine time going by and that balloon amount coming due. On top of that, Lucy didn't really think of her house as belonging to her. It was really Penelope's. It seemed appropriate to Lucy that she draw upon its value when Penelope's kids needed her. Still, Lucy wasn't a complete martyr. She loved her work, considered painting the center of her life. She loved nurturing Penelope's kids, and was so accustomed to repressing her attraction to Joey, she could continue to do so indefinitely. **Do you relate to her on any level?** Yes. I am similarly passionate about my need to write, and I am very intuitive in my responses to things like parenting. I can't say *why* I'm doing what I do, but I have a deep-seated gut instinct that, for the most part, we should apply the golden rule to raising children. In other words, we should treat children as we ourselves would like to be treated. This is a somewhat unorthodox view of parenting and you can easily imagine how --in times of uncertainty -- it could be displaced by someone like Siobhan, who's so confident about her more authoritarian approach.

9. A major theme of this novel is friendships and sacrifice. Do you think friendship comes with certain loyalties and requirements? **Absolutely.** Would you do anything to help a friend? **Not anything, but my friends know they can count on me for a lot. I think one of the glorious things about friends is that they tend to judge you far more kindly than you will yourself.**

10. If you could choose to be best friends with any character in the novel, who would you choose and why?

Tough choice but I think I'd choose Penelope. She is so attractive, accomplished, complicated and charming. (And of course she's gone, which makes her immediately the most desirable.) Plus, what would it be like to taken under her wing? Actually, it's interesting to me that Penelope is sort of the uber-mother of them all. Not only does she see her friends' greatest qualities, but she's more than willing to use her connections and money to help them achieve their dreams. What's not to love about that?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Martha's husband, Sateesh, runs a restaurant where Sateesh is always experimenting with new recipes to debut. Suggest an Indian potluck for your next meeting so that you can taste the flavors of India while discussing the book. Have everyone research an Indian recipe to create and share. You can find many recipes online at www.recipesindian.com or www.indianfoodforever.com.
2. Lucy's world revolves around her art, and she uses her paintings as a way to work through her problems. Compare Lucy's feelings with your own and schedule an art day. Have everyone bring in pictures or books of their favorite artists and paintings and talk about why they like or dislike them. Explore new, modern artists on www.artnet.com or www.moma.org.
3. Tessa's struggle with anorexia is one of the emotional centerpieces of the book. Discuss the issues of anorexia and bulimia with your group, and what, if any, experiences you may have had. There are many websites that offer tips for spotting the problems and how to overcome them. Share your thoughts on the issue and on the "pro-anorexia" sites.