

READING GROUP GUIDE

Everything Will be All Right

by Tessa Hadley

ISBN: 0-312-42364-0

About the Book

Richly observed and psychologically astute, Tessa Hadley's *Everything Will Be All Right* is the story of four generations of women: Lil and Vera, sisters, one a dreamer, the other an independent and opinionated school teacher; Lil's daughter Joyce, smart, willful and married to one man her entire life; Joyce's child Zoe, studious, intelligent but unsuccessful with men; and her daughter Pearl, rebellious and undisciplined, a disappointment to her mom. Exploring the ways that history and social expectations determine women's destinies and their self-perceptions, the novel is, as Margot Livesey says, "a wonderfully complex and vivid portrait of women's lives during the second half of the twentieth century."

About the Author

TESSA HADLEY teaches literature and creative writing at Bath Spa University College. Her first novel, *Accidents in the Home*, which was excerpted in *The New Yorker*, was longlisted for *The Guardian's First Book Award*. She lives in Cardiff, Wales.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think male and female readers will respond differently to *Everything Will Be All Right*? Why? Is there such a thing as a women's novel? A man's novel? Explain.
2. What is the significance of time and place in the story? In what ways do history and culture shape each of the character's personalities? How has history and culture shaped your own life differently from, say, your parents and, if applicable, your children?

3. When comparing her mother to her aunt, the young Joyce believes “that although Aunt Vera could be hateful, with her loud superior voice and her bruising definitiveness, Joyce thought that in such a contest it would be safer to be bruising than bruised” (pg 22). What does this statement reveal about her character? Are there other examples of this attitude of hers elsewhere in the novel? Does it explain anything about her later affection for Pearl?
4. On page 33, Joyce notes “that when Lil and Vera talked about men. . . they often used this language of mock conflict, as if there had to be a war between men and women.” In what ways do the male/female relationships in the novel reinforce that belief? In what ways do they disprove it? Which couples in the book are particularly embattled? Why? Do changes in history and culture seem to affect the way men and women relate in the novel?
5. Consider Ray’s comments to Joyce on page 139: “Sometimes it feels to a man. . . as if women want to make the world sweet. . . But it’s not sweet. And it’s sometimes a strain, standing on guard, pretending to the woman that everything’s going to be all right, everything’s nice.” Do you agree or disagree with Ray? Why? Where else in the novel does a character tell another that “everything will be all right”? How do those two scenes differ? What do they say about the title of the book?
6. As a young female student, Joyce describes how “once she had come, through books mostly, to believe that there had really been other times in the past when things were done differently, she felt sure that the past must have been a better place” (pp. 146-7). How has reading affected your perspective of the past? Are there advantages and dangers to learning about history through fiction? Explain.
7. Discuss the female characters’ various feelings about their appearance. How do each of them perceive their looks and its importance in the world? Do you think that Hadley believes that social attitudes towards women’s physical appearance has changed during the five decades depicted in the novel? If you’re a woman, do you relate to the self-image of any of the characters? Why?
8. Chapter five portrays the complex relationship between two young women, Zoe and Fiona. What attracts the two women to each other? What pulls them apart? Can you think of a similar such friendship that you may have had in your life? Finally, discuss the role that class and social expectations of the 1960s plays in the separate fates of each woman.
9. Why do you think Zoe and Simon are attracted to each other? How do their initial feelings concerning family and parenthood differ? How do those perspectives change? Did your perceptions of Zoe and Simon shift over the course of the novel?
10. The novel ends amid recent world events. What are those events? And how do the various characters react? Do you think the novel ends on a hopeful or ominous note?

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