

Reading Group Guide

1. *Everything Is Just Fine* is told through e-mail chains and prose. Do you get a different feeling about the characters with one format or the other? Are the e-mails less intimate or more so? Do the prose sections make you feel closer to the characters? Have you been on similar e-mail chains and, if so, were you surprised when you met someone after forming an idea of them from just the way they weighed in on a chain?
2. Are the two main characters, Randy and Diane, sympathetic? Do your feelings about them change throughout the novel?
3. Do you think Patrick Wu actually astral projects, or are his flights only in his imagination? Have you heard of children who have been raised in stressful environments disassociating from their bodies?
4. Were you surprised that Diane and Alejandro's relationship became much deeper than either one of them expected? What do you think drew them together?
5. Diane begs Randy to tell Missy the truth about losing his job. Why is Diane so insistent on him laying everything bare, even if he risks losing Missy?
6. Diane and Karen find that divorce forces them to confront the fact that they probably weren't happy in the first place. Do you know of examples of this in your own life?
7. Do you think that Randy and Missy loved each other at one time? What was the nature of that love? How do you think their relationship affects their interaction with Aiden?
8. We find out, late in the book, that Jacqui probably had romantic feelings toward a female friend, but she squashed those feelings down. What are some other examples of characters not being honest with themselves throughout novel? Do you think that we all lie to ourselves in equal amounts, or do some people do it more than others?
9. At the end, Patrick thinks that he "understands contradictions very well. We are not one thing or the other. He is, after all, a good son and a thief. There are stories hidden in everyone's soul, and even as we choose one thing over another, one lover over the rest, a place to live, a job, to have children or not—we are stunned by our helplessness in the face of circumstances that simply choose us." What are some of the contradictions the characters have been living with and is it true that we all live contradictions? And what are some of the circumstances that chose our characters (like the fact that all of them ended up on the same team in the first place)? How much control do we have over our lives?

10. At its core, *Everything Is Just Fine* is about our need to connect, and how we mistake many things for true connection. For example, Randy thinks that the deck will make Missy happy and bring friends over to hang out in his backyard. Jacqui believes that she's connecting when she gives her pep talks. How else are characters seeking connection and still ending up dissatisfied?
11. Could Randy and Missy have been happy, staying together at the end? What would/could their marriage look like if they had?
12. Randy and Diane have this exchange on the beach, right before Randy tells Missy everything:

“Did it ever once occur to you that things weren't that terrible?” she yells over her shoulder.

“She cheated on me.”

“Which sucks. And hurts. But, Randy—” She stops again and turns back to him. “How big are your problems, really? How big are any of our problems?”

Randy throws his hands up. “They're pretty damn big, Diane. They're big to me!”

“We live in Beverly fucking Hills!”

The author calls her novel a social satire. Given this dialogue, what do you think is being satirized? Are some people's problems bigger than those of others? Or are our problems only as big or small as we experience them to be?

A Conversation with Brett Paesel

Let's start at the beginning. What was the inspiration for *Everything Is Just Fine*?

I live close to Beverly Hills but in a much more modest neighborhood. Several years ago, I enrolled my oldest son in Beverly Hills soccer so that he could be on a team with a friend, and it was like landing on another planet. Beverly Hills teams do, indeed, hire young “semipro” from a foreign country to help coach. Ours was English, and very charming, and I kept thinking, “He must get laid every night of the week.” As it turns out, I was right. Also, one of my son's coaches started sending long game recaps every week, and they seemed to get more and more impassioned the closer we got to the end of the season. I made up a story in my head about him. I decided that he had lost his job and that winning the tournament was becoming an obsession that would somehow restore his sense of manhood. I started to write it down as a short story told only through e-mails, but I kept wanting to know more and more about the characters, so I opened up their home lives through prose and it soon became a novel.

In the novel, many of the characters seem to be able to be more direct in e-mails than in life. Were you trying to say anything about modern technology and how it affects our communication with each other?

Not necessarily. We used to write letters in longhand and talk more frequently over the phone. I think that we communicate *differently* when there's a medium like letter-writing, than we do face to face. In some ways, I think people can be more honest when they're separated a bit. That's certainly true for Randy. That said, gut-level honesty, like the kind Karen and Mark Sonnenklar indulge in, doesn't help anyone, least of all their child. There is something interesting about e-mail being so immediate. The separation gives us the freedom to say some pretty terrible things as well as lovely things. The immediacy can remove restraint.

That said, there are different kinds of honesty. E-mail often provides a way to say what we have a hard time saying in person. But it doesn't necessarily help us be honest with ourselves. I would argue, that that kind of "facing our own demons" tends to be a more personal process. When Diane gets in the car with Missy to possibly "save Randy," the only way she can do that is by showing up, not by texting.

Is that something you're getting at in the book? The fact that at some point, people have to ultimately "show up"?

Absolutely. Missy and Diane show up at the beach. Karen and Mark have to show up at games together, to support their child. Paul keeps showing up with his wife and not saying much of anything—all to save his marriage. Jacqui has to show up at school and accept help for Calvin. And Alejandro has to show up back home in Colombia so he can dissipate some of his guilt over leaving. Showing up is terrifying. At least I think so. It's also, in direct contradiction, one of the easiest things to do on the planet. As much as we'd like to, we can't live life by proxy.

You mention being honest with ourselves, which is something that Diane talks about several times—both in reference to herself and to Randy and Alejandro. Is that one of the central themes of the book?

How did you guess? Yes. Yes. Yes. Because being honest with oneself leads to deeper connection with the people we care about. If we don't know or can't admit that we are unhappy or suffering, if we continue to define ourselves by what we own (Randy's deck) or what we do (Paul's missed promotion) or the neighborhoods we live in or the people we're married to or the schools our children go to—we'll never get that intimacy that we all crave. Because everything is built on a shaky foundation of our unexamined lives, and we secretly know it. So we walk around the world, protecting ourselves from being found out somehow. And that shuts everyone out. Diane discovers this throughout the novel. That's why she starts throwing everything out of her house and starting over. There's real hope for her.

You are an actress as well as a writer. How does that affect your writing?

I've also been a producer on a couple of television shows. Recently I told my husband that I was trying to distill what I do into a short description, and I realized two things. The first is that I am a storyteller, whether I'm acting, writing, or producing. I have always translated my experience into stories. At dinner, I tell stories about my day and I love hearing everyone else's. Secondly, what I have learned through all this storytelling is how to track the emotional logic of a character. By putting myself in a character's skin, I can feel (on a gut level) what that character would or would not do based on internal logic. Randy, for example, keeps looking for an escape hatch. If one hatch slams shut, he'll look for the next one. It really doesn't occur to him to sit still and face what's coming at him.

I am deeply moved by our human-ness—our fucked-upedness. I think that each one of us thinks we're a mess and everyone else is just fine. To me, stories are a salve for that. They heal. When I teach, I always tell my writing students to start from a place of being the biggest idiot in the room. Start by admitting that you know nothing, that you say and do the wrong things all the time, that you get worn-out and think the most selfish thoughts. No one wants to read or hear about how someone was so perfect that they knew exactly what to do every step of the way and implemented every plan perfectly. We want to know that there are other idiots out there. We need to know that we are not alone.

And yet, your work is comedic. How do you keep it light when you're thinking about the basic fucked-upedness of human beings?

As much as I translate my experience into stories, I also see the world as absurd. Not necessarily in an existential sense. I mean that the amount of energy we invest in ideas and things is kind of silly. For example, I can have a full-on meltdown—screaming at my kids to get them out the door on time in the morning. But really, how much does it matter if they're ten minutes late? The reason why it matters at the time is that I have an idea in my head that I've imbued with a lot of power. And that idea is that I am a responsible and dependable parent. The possibility that my kids might be late or that my youngest will be wearing the same shorts he's worn all week, and looks like he rolled around in mud, wounds my sense of self. Murphy's shorts are the reason why we're all late, by the way, because he has refused to change them. So there you are—comedy and tragedy. I'm not budging because I am sure that I will be judged negatively and he's not budging because his sense of self demands the comfort of those damned shorts.

That scene I just described is a whole story to me. And were I to write it down later, I would have time to fill in other details, like the fact that my other son is a fastidious dresser, which probably makes Murphy feel like he's never going to measure up in the first place. Or maybe Murphy's other, clean and better-fitting shorts remind him that his body is changing and he doesn't want to grow up too fast. So there's lots going on here, but on the surface there's simply a mom losing her cool with only two minutes left on the clock.

Your memoir was called *Mommies Who Drink* and this novel is peopled by parents and kids. Do you think that readers have to be parents in order to relate?

Jeez, I hope not. I read a ton of books about people who aren't parents and I actively choose books written by authors who are not like me at all. David Sedaris is a gay man who doesn't have kids, but I love his work. I would hope that he would enjoy mine just as much. Readers of mine don't have to be parents to understand the panic I feel, getting out of the house with my two kids. I assume that they panic over things just as trivial.

There is an assumption that only moms will read or watch stories that take place in the parenting arena (I use that rather awkward phrase because I wouldn't say that my novel is *about* parenting). It doesn't take a genius to surmise that this is an extremely sexist notion. I hope that anyone who is interested in laughing at themselves, while thinking more deeply about how we communicate and what we value, will enjoy my work.

It sounds like you are pretty serious about being funny.

Deadly serious.