DIY Book Discussion

The Interestings

by Meg Wolitzer

Author Info:

- born May 28, 1959, in Brooklyn, NY
- daughter of Morton (a psychologist) and Hilma (a novelist) Wolitzer
- married Richard J. Panek (a writer) in 1989 and had 2 children - Gabriel and Charlie
- attended Smith College, 1977-79 and Brown University obtaining a B.A. in 1981

Reviews:
Wolitzer’s (“The Uncoupling”) latest novel follows a group of creative types from the beginning of their friendship as teenagers through middle age. Hipsters before their time, they dub themselves The Interestings, in an effort at pretentious irony, with only group member Julie Jacobson truly believing that they are quite interesting. While two members of the group go on to find success in their artistic pursuits, others like Julie give up the dream and resign themselves to raising families and nine-to-five careers.
VERDICT The novel skips back and forth, revealing information about each member of the group and covering their triumphs and tragedies over the course of the years. Ultimately, the work hits its own ironic note: Julie's successful and creative friends are far more normal than she'd ever realized. This is certain to attract readers of literary and smart women’s fiction.


Wolitzer (The Uncoupling, 2011) follows a group of friends from adolescence at an artsy summer camp in 1974 through adulthood and into late-middle age as their lives alternately intersect, diverge and reconnect. Middle-class suburban Julie becomes Jules when a group of more sophisticated kids from Manhattan include her in their clique at Camp Spirit-in-the-Woods in upstate New York. Her lifelong best friend becomes beautiful Ash, an aspiring actress. Ash's older brother is sexy bad-boy Goodman. Cathy, who wants to dance, becomes Goodman's girlfriend. Jonah, the ethereally handsome, slightly withdrawn son of a famous folksinger, is musically gifted. And then there is Ethan: homely, funny and a brilliant cartoonist. Although he and Jules are immediately soul mates, she rejects his physical advances, unable to work up any sexual attraction. After this first idyllic summer, the novel cuts to 2009 when Jules, now living a modest middle-class life as a therapist married to a medical technician, receives her annual Christmas letter from Ethan and Ash, who are married and wildly successful. As she looks back, the reader follows the evolution of the group. While still in high school, Cathy and Goodman break
up in disastrous fashion; they both disappear from the group but not without causing permanent repercussions. For one thing, to Jules’ surprise, Goodman’s grieving sister Ash and Ethan become an unlikely but devoted couple. Jonah, who evolves as the inevitable sympathetic gay character in a novel tracing social mores through the last decades of the 20th century, gives up music for engineering. Ash becomes a feminist director and marries Ethan, the true genius of the group, who experiences major creative and financial success with his long-running animated series. Jules, who has given up acting to become a therapist and has married sweet but unambitious Dennis, tries not to envy her friend’s success. Secrets are kept for decades among the six “Interestings”; resentments are nursed; loyalties are tested with mixed results. Ambitious and involving, capturing the zeitgeist of the liberal intelligentsia of the era.


Thoreson, B. [Review of the book Below stairs: The classic kitchen maid’s memoir that inspired Upstairs, Downstairs and Downton Abbey]. Booklist. Retrieved from: http://amzn.to/1LgOc4v

Discussion Questions:
1. Think about how talent is presented in the book. In your opinion, is it something you are born with or something you work hard to achieve? What is Meg Wolitzer saying about early talent? How is it important to future success? What roles do money and class play in fostering talent? Think about Jules and Ash. How does money influence the trajectories of their lives?

2. Jealousy is referred to in the book as being “I want what you have,” whereas envy is “I want what you have, but I also want to take it away so you can't have it.” Who is jealous in this book? Who is envious? Can jealousy become envy? How is envy tied up in issues like talent and money?

3. Single parents, lost parents, and absent parents play a role in this novel. In what ways do the families the characters were born into shape their futures? Ash and Goodman are the only characters to come from an intact nuclear family that is able to provide for all their needs. Do you think this is necessarily a good thing for Goodman? What about Ash?
Discussion Questions Cont’d:

4. Despite the well-quoted sentiment that “you can’t go home again,” Jules tries to return to the place that felt like her spiritual, emotional, and artistic home. Are there circumstances in life in which you can go home again successfully? Is Jules foolish to give up her current life for something much more uncertain? What positive changes does the experience bring?

5. Despite how much she wants to, Jules cannot make herself fall in love with Ethan. Do you wish she were able to? Do you think Jules wishes she could? What about Ethan?

6. Ethan is one of the most noble characters in the book, and yet he has trouble reconciling his son’s condition and lies to Ash to avoid going to Mo’s evaluation. How does Ethan’s ambivalence about Mo change the way you feel about him? How do you feel about Jules’s complicity in his deception?

7. The shift from the seventies to theeighties to the current moment is an important one depicted in the book. What do you think Meg Wolitzer is trying to say about art and how art is sold? How does the commoditization of art change the role of the artist? Was the art of the seventies as pure as it seemed to the creators? The Wunderlichs remain true to an even earlier version of what art should be. What are the positives of that vision? What are its limits?

8. What role does geography play in the book? Think about the different spaces and homes represented: Manhattan, Underhill, Spirit-in-the-Woods. What do they say about the people who live in them? Think about Jules’s own feelings about her mother’s home in Underhill compared with the Wolfs’ home in Manhattan. What do those two spaces mean to her?


Suggested Reading Suggestions:

* Carry the One by Carol Anshaw
* Shotgun Lovesongs by Nickolas Butler
* A Visit from the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan
* Arcadia by Lauren Groff
* How to Start a Fire by Lisa Lutz
* Beautiful Ruins by Jess Walter