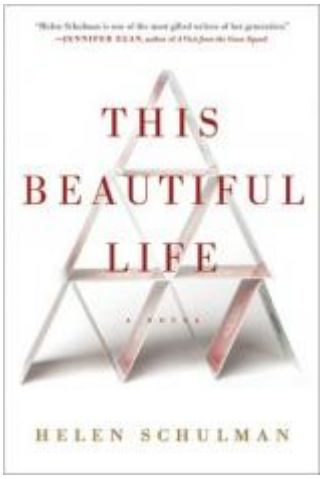
bookreporter

This Beautiful Life

by Helen Schulman



About the Book

When the Bergamots move from a comfortable upstate college town to New York City, they're not quite sure how they'll adapt --- or what to make of the strange new world of well-to-do Manhattan. Soon, though, Richard is consumed by his executive role at a large New York university, and Liz, who has traded in her academic career to oversee the lives of their children, is hectically ferrying young Coco around town.

Fifteen-year-old Jake is gratefully taken into the fold by a group of friends at Wildwood, an elite private school.

But the upper-class cocoon in which they have enveloped themselves is ripped apart when Jake wakes up one morning after an unchaperoned party and finds an email in his in-box from an eighth-grade admirer. Attached is a sexually explicit video she has made for him. Shocked, stunned, maybe a little proud, and scared—a jumble of adolescent emotion --- he forwards the video to a friend, who then for-wards it to a friend. Within hours, it's gone viral, all over the school, the city, the world.

The ensuing scandal threatens to shatter the Bergamots' sense of security and identity, and, ultimately, their happiness. They are a good family faced with bad choices, and how they choose to react, individually and at one another's behest, places everything they hold dear in jeopardy.

THIS BEAUTIFUL LIFE is a devastating exploration of the blurring boundaries of privacy and the fragility of self, a clear-eyed portrait of modern life that will have readers debating their assumptions about family, morality, and the sacrifices and choices we make in the name of love.

Discussion Guide

1. What are your impressions of the Bergamot family? How do Liz and Richard's backgrounds influence how they view the good fortune of their lives?

2. Do you think Liz and Richard are good parents? Liz believes she's not better or worse than other mothers. Do you agree with her? What makes a good parent? Does she love her son "too much"—"crippling in its way" as she calls it? Explain what she means.

3. At the beginning of the novel, Liz and Coco are at the Plaza for a sleepover. How do the events at the sleepover and Liz's observations about the soon-to-close hotel foreshadow what follows?

4. What was the Bergamot family's life like before they moved to New York City? Might the same situation have occurred if they had remained in Ithaca? How much does the urban milieu --- and the moneyed world they are a part of --- influence the behaviors of both parents and students, especially the Bergamots?

5. When it comes to girls and sex, Jake is a typically confused teen. “His Mom was always saying don't take advantage of a girl, but what if a girl wanted to be taken advantage of?” How would you answer him?

6. Why does Jake forward the video Daisy sends him? How do his peers react when it goes viral? How did they view Daisy and Jake? What about the other parents? Is there a clear-cut villain and victim?

7. Compare the two girls at the center of Jake's consciousness, Audrey and Daisy. What do you think the future holds for them? What have they learned from the events that pass? What about Jake? And what about his precocious and popular five-year-old sister, Coco?

8. In the midst of the crisis, Jake is reading The Great Gatsby for school. How do the themes of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel reverberate in This Beautiful Life? What does Jake take away from reading the novel in light of his own situation?

9. Think about the Bergamot's reaction to the scandal. Do you agree with their actions? Could they have made different choices? What might you do if your child was either Daisy or Jake? What is the proper punishment for their behaviors? How much of Richard's reaction is related to concern over his job and career?

10. Early in the novel, Liz reveals her feelings about home and family. “It was what Liz always hungered after despite generations of contrary evidence: Relatives as respite, home as haven, a retreat from the rest of the dangerous, damaging world.” How does the shelter of family and home crumble after Jake's indiscretion? Could the damage have been prevented?

11. How did the event change how Liz and Richard see themselves and each other? Are they both responsible for what follows? Why can't Liz maintain their “beautiful life” anymore?

12. While the events in This Beautiful Life are fictional, similar cases have made headlines around the country. What does the novel say about our society? How has the Internet affected our behavior, especially that of adolescents? The author sets the book in 2003; how might the outcome have been different had the narrative taken place a decade later?

13. What are your thoughts on the novel's ending?

Author Bio

Author of four novels, A Day at the Beach (Houghton Mifflin, 2007), P.S. (Bloomsbury, 2001), The Revisionist (Crown, 1998), and Out of Time (Atheneum, 1991), and a short story collection, Not A Free Show (KNOPF, 1988). She is a co-editor with Jill Bialosky of the anthology Wanting a Child (FSG, 2001). P.S. was made into a film starring Laura Linney and Topher Grace, and the screenplay was written by Helen Schulman and Dylan Kidd. Her fiction, nonfiction, and reviews have been published in *Vanity Fair, Time, GQ, Vogue, New York Times* and the *New York Times Book Review* among others. She has taught at Emory, Bard, Bennington, NYU, Columbia, and the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. Awards include a Sundance Fellowship, a Pushcart Prize, and a New York Foundation for the Arts grant.

Critical Praise

"As wry and entertaining as Schulman’s social observations are, it’s the totally convincing nightmare aspect of her novel that will keep parental readers up at night."

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