

# Same As It Ever Was

by Claire Lombardo

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## About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of **THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD** (‘wonderfully immersive’/‘deliciously absorbing’ ?NPR) returns with another brilliantly observed family drama in which the enduring, hard-won affection of a long marriage faces imminent derailment from events both past and present.

**SAME AS IT EVER WAS** showcases the consummate style, signature wit and profound emotional intelligence that made **THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD** one of the most beloved novels of the past decade. Featuring a memorably messy family and the multifaceted marriage at its heart, Lombardo’s debut was dubbed ‘the literary love child of Jonathan Franzen and Anne Tyler’ (*The Guardian*) and hailed as ‘ambitious and brilliantly written’ (*Washington Post*). In this remarkable follow-up --- another elegant and tumultuous story in the tradition of Elizabeth Strout, Ann Patchett and Celeste Ng --- Lombardo introduces us to an unforgettable cast of characters, this time by way of her singularly complicated protagonist.

Julia Ames, after a youth marked by upheaval and emotional turbulence, has found herself on the placid plateau of mid-life. But Julia has never navigated the world with the equanimity of her current privileged class. Having nearly derailed herself several times, making desperate bids for the kind of connection that always felt inaccessible to her, she finally feels, at age 57, that she has a firm handle on things.

She’s unprepared, though, for what comes next: a surprise announcement from her straight-arrow son, an impending separation from her spikey teenaged daughter, and a seductive resurgence of the past, all of which threaten to draw her back into the patterns that had previously kept her on a razor’s edge.

**SAME AS IT EVER WAS** traverses the rocky terrain of real life, exploring new avenues of maternal ambivalence, intergenerational friendship and the happenstantial cause-and-effect that governs us all. Delving even deeper into the nature of relationships --- how they grow, change and sometimes end --- Lombardo proves herself a true and definitive

cartographer of the human heart and asserts herself among the finest novelists of her generation.

## Discussion Guide

1. When you were first introduced to Helen Russo, what were your hunches about her history with Julia? As their story unfolded, what did you observe about the basis of their friendship? What did they ultimately need from each other?
2. What were the greatest sources of tension in Mark and Julia's marriage? What were the sturdiest strands --- emotional or otherwise --- that held their relationship together and strengthened it over the years?
3. As Julia copes with feelings of loneliness after Ben is born, what does she discover about herself? If that story of new parenthood had been told from Mark's point of view, how would it have been different? How did his experiences as an outsider in his family shape his approach to fatherhood?
4. Are there any parallels between Julia's trysts with Nathaniel and her relationship with Jonathan when she was a high school senior? In both cases, how was she affected by the power imbalance of a difference in age? What other vulnerabilities were in place in those situations?
5. Discuss the varied meanings of the novel's title. In this multigenerational book, to what extent does history repeat itself? In the novel, do the repetitions of daily habits and the rituals of celebration provide comfort, or are they a form of entrapment? What does it take for the next generation to make corrections?
6. How did your impressions of Julia's mother, Anita Greene, change as you learned more about her? How much of Julia's emotional state, along with her beliefs about men and motherhood, is the result of her mother's choices? How heavily do temperament and fate factor in?
7. If you were Julia, would you have been wary of Brady and Francine? What lies at the heart of Julia's penchant for comparing herself to others, with a special emphasis on Helen's wine selections? How do money and class affect Julia's sense of self?
8. Are Ben and Sunny embarking on a marriage of equals? How is their attitude toward parenting different from that of their parents?
9. What are the differences and similarities in Ben's and Alma's upbringings?
10. As Alma/Ollie and Margo prepare to launch their adult lives, what possibilities are available to them that Julia didn't have? Intentionally or not, what has Julia taught her daughter about womanhood and resilience?
11. One constant throughout the novel is Suzanne, the tiny terrier. What enables pets to sustain a human family, sometimes echoing the personalities of their owners?
12. The novel's timeline reflects the way memory is interwoven with the present. As Julia's childhood became clearly focused for you, how did your understanding shift? How did the revelations about her father, Lawrence M. Marini, and her decision to forego the scholarship at Northwestern affect the course of her life? In your life, do important things

usually happen accidentally or intentionally? Does memory provide momentum, or is it a hurdle?

**13.** What transformations does Julia undergo in the closing scenes? How did those scenes impact the way you view your own relationships? Which moments from your life would you like to experience as a freeze frame?

**14.** How does SAME AS IT EVER WAS add a new dimension to the depiction of families and hidden truths in Claire Lombardo's debut novel, THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD? What is unique about the parents and siblings who inhabit her storylines?

## Author Bio

Claire Lombardo is the author of THE MOST FUN WE EVER HAD, which has been optioned for television by Reese Witherspoon, and SAME AS IT EVER WAS. She lives in Iowa City, where she has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and Grinnell College and works part-time as a bookseller at Prairie Lights Books.

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