

we are not ourselves a novel

We Are Not Ourselves is a poignant and intricately woven novel by Matthew Thomas that explores the complexities of identity, family, and the inexorable passage of time. Published in 2014, this debut novel has received widespread acclaim for its rich character development and its exploration of the American Dream, particularly as it dissects the lives of an Irish-American family in the suburbs of New York City during the latter half of the twentieth century. This article delves into the themes, characters, and narrative style of "We Are Not Ourselves," while also discussing its critical reception and the broader implications of its story.

Overview of the Novel

"We Are Not Ourselves" is structured around the life of Eileen Tumulty, a fiercely ambitious woman who strives for a better life for herself and her family. The novel spans several decades, beginning in the 1950s and extending into the early 2000s. Eileen's journey is marked by her desire to escape her mundane existence and to achieve upward mobility, which she equates with success and fulfillment.

The novel's title itself is a reflection of the central theme: the idea that our identities are shaped by our relationships, circumstances, and the passage of time. Eileen's pursuit of the American Dream is complicated by her husband's struggles with early-onset Alzheimer's disease, which serves as a catalyst for her transformation and a re-evaluation of her life and values.

Character Analysis

The characters in "We Are Not Ourselves" are richly developed, each representing different facets of Eileen's life and the broader societal dynamics at play.

Eileen Tumulty

Eileen is the protagonist and a deeply complex character. Her ambition drives much of the narrative. She is portrayed as a woman who is both resilient and vulnerable—determined to create a life that defies the limitations of her upbringing. Eileen embodies the struggle of many women of her era, caught between traditional roles and the desire for independence.

- **Ambition:** Eileen's desire for a better life is a double-edged sword; it fuels her but also isolates her from those she loves.

- Resilience: Despite the many setbacks she faces, including her husband's illness, Eileen demonstrates an unwavering determination to provide for her family.
- Identity Crisis: As her husband's condition worsens, Eileen grapples with her sense of self, questioning what it means to be a wife, a mother, and an individual apart from her family.

Ed Tumulty

Ed is Eileen's husband, whose early-onset Alzheimer's disease becomes a central theme in the novel. Initially portrayed as a supportive and loving partner, Ed's gradual decline forces both Eileen and their son to confront uncomfortable truths about their lives.

- Transformation: Ed's character transitions from a vibrant man full of dreams to a shadow of his former self, highlighting the devastating effects of illness on family dynamics.
- Impact on Family: His condition serves as a catalyst for change, pushing Eileen into new roles and forcing their son to navigate the complexities of his father's illness.

Conn Tumulty

Conn, the couple's son, represents a younger generation grappling with the legacy of their parents' dreams and disappointments. His relationship with both Eileen and Ed shapes much of his character arc.

- Struggle for Identity: Conn's journey reflects the challenges of finding one's place in a world marked by familial expectations and personal aspirations.
- Perspective on Illness: His experience of his father's illness offers a unique viewpoint on aging, loss, and the fragility of the human experience.

Thematic Exploration

"We Are Not Ourselves" delves into several significant themes that resonate throughout the narrative.

The American Dream

At its core, the novel is an exploration of the American Dream and the lengths to which individuals will go to achieve it. Eileen's pursuit of a better life is emblematic of the broader aspirations that define American

culture.

- Materialism vs. Fulfillment: The novel interrogates whether material success equates to happiness, ultimately suggesting that true fulfillment may lie in relationships rather than possessions.
- Disillusionment: Eileen's experiences reflect the disillusionment that often accompanies the pursuit of the American Dream, particularly for women who navigate societal expectations.

Identity and Transformation

Identity is another central theme in the novel, particularly as it relates to the roles that individuals inhabit. Eileen's evolution throughout the story speaks to the fluid nature of identity, especially in the face of adversity.

- Role of Caregiver: Eileen's transformation into a caregiver for Ed highlights the complexities of identity when faced with the responsibilities of family.
- Personal Growth: As Eileen confronts her husband's illness, she undergoes a profound transformation that forces her to reconsider her values and priorities.

The Impact of Illness

Illness plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and the characters' lives. Ed's Alzheimer's diagnosis serves as a lens through which the family's dynamics are explored.

- Family Dynamics: The strain of caregiving reshapes Eileen and Conn's relationships, revealing underlying tensions and unspoken truths.
- Mortality and Acceptance: The novel poignantly addresses themes of mortality, acceptance, and the struggle to maintain one's identity in the face of debilitating illness.

Narrative Style and Structure

Matthew Thomas employs a rich, lyrical prose style that captures the emotional depth of the characters and their experiences. The novel is structured in a way that allows readers to experience the passage of time alongside the characters, deepening the emotional impact of their journeys.

- Multiple Perspectives: The narrative shifts between Eileen, Ed, and Conn, offering a multifaceted view of the family's struggles and triumphs.
- Temporal Shifts: The non-linear timeline enhances the sense of nostalgia and reflection, inviting readers to contemplate the characters' pasts in

relation to their present circumstances.

Critical Reception

"We Are Not Ourselves" has been met with critical acclaim, praised for its emotional resonance and character depth. Critics have highlighted several aspects of the novel:

- Character Development: Reviewers have noted the complexity of the characters, particularly Eileen, whose journey is both relatable and harrowing.
- Thematic Depth: The exploration of the American Dream and identity has been recognized as a significant contribution to contemporary literature.
- Emotional Impact: Many readers have resonated with the novel's portrayal of illness and family dynamics, often citing it as a deeply moving experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "We Are Not Ourselves" is a masterful exploration of identity, ambition, and the human condition. Matthew Thomas crafts a narrative that is both intimate and universal, inviting readers to reflect on their own lives and the complexities of familial relationships. Through the lens of Eileen Tumulty's struggles, the novel offers profound insights into the nature of identity and the relentless passage of time. As readers journey alongside Eileen, Ed, and Conn, they are compelled to confront their own understandings of love, loss, and what it means to truly be oneself.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the central themes explored in 'We Are Not Ourselves'?

The novel explores themes of identity, the impact of illness on family dynamics, the pursuit of the American Dream, and the complexities of love and sacrifice.

How does the character of Eileen in 'We Are Not Ourselves' evolve throughout the story?

Eileen evolves from an ambitious, hopeful woman into a more complex character grappling with her husband's Alzheimer's disease, ultimately facing her vulnerabilities and redefining her identity.

What role does the setting play in 'We Are Not Ourselves'?

The setting, primarily in suburban New York, serves as a backdrop that reflects the aspirations and struggles of the characters, illustrating the clash between personal desires and societal expectations.

How does the author, Matthew Thomas, use symbolism in 'We Are Not Ourselves'?

Thomas employs symbolism through various elements, such as the family's home representing stability and the disruption caused by illness, highlighting the fragility of life and relationships.

What is the significance of the title 'We Are Not Ourselves'?

The title signifies the changes individuals undergo due to circumstances beyond their control, particularly illness, and the idea that one's identity can be profoundly altered by life events.

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