

Everything Is Not Enough Short Guide

Everything Is Not Enough by Sandy Asher

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Overview

As the only son of doting parents, Michael Paeglis has moved through his privileged life with a minimum of problems. So why can't he be content with his life? He has everything, isn't that enough? No, he wants more. He wants a feeling of accomplishment at the end of a day and the satisfaction of working toward a goal that he set. He wants control of his life.

During his seventeenth summer, Michael discovers the strength of character within himself that allows him to confront his well-meaning parents. He does not want to hurt them, he only wants to make choices for his future that he can live with; he does not want to follow in his father's footsteps and join him in the jewelry business. The interaction among Michael, his parents, his summer friends, and the townspeople he becomes involved with, weaves a fascinating story. Michael is an easy-to-identify-with hero who faces his future, makes hard choices, and begins to live independently.

About the Author

Sandra Fenichel Asher was born October 16, 1942, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Dr. Benjamin and Fanny Weiner Fenichel. She attended the University of Pennsylvania then transferred to Indiana University where she earned a bachelor's degree in 1964. A year's graduate study at the University of Connecticut and an elementary education certificate from Drury College in Springfield, Missouri, augmented her formal education.

Asher combined her love for theater and writing as early as second grade when she wrote and starred in plays that toured from classroom to classroom. Since then she has honed her skills and published numerous award-winning plays which have been produced across the country. She is also a poet, having published some seventy poems, and has contributed stories and articles to several national magazines, for both children and adults.

Writing for young adults is a responsibility Asher takes very seriously. Because teenagers use many sources, even novels, to shape their beliefs, Asher carefully considers what she writes about and how she says it. The result has been sensitive young adult books that deal with serious issues that are especially meaningful for teen-agers. Several of her young adult novels have been honored with awards. *Just Like Jenny* was nominated to the Mark Twain Award Master List in 1984; *Missing Pieces* was voted one of the University of Iowa Outstanding Books for Young Adults and was named to the Child Study Association Best Books list in 1985; and *Things Are Seldom What They Seem* was nominated for the Iowa Teen Award and Young Hoosier Award, in 1986-1987. Currently, Asher is writer-in-residence at Drury College.

She and her husband Harvey, a history professor, have two children and live in Springfield, Missouri.

Setting

Every summer three-fourths of the mothers and children from Maple Grove, New Jersey, flock to summer cottages by the seashore at Braden's Port. The fathers join them on the weekends. It has been a tradition for Michael's and Buddy's families for as long as the boys can remember. The pattern of Saturday night sundaes and afternoons at the beach has remained the same until the summer before Michael's senior year. His discontentment with his life and the direction it is heading forces him to make a stand and assert his own independence.

After eighteen interviews for other jobs, Michael finds work as a busboy at the Jolly Mackerel restaurant. The clientele are winter people, the workers are winter people, and privileged summer-boy Michael gets a taste of what it is like to be on the outside of wealth, looking in.

Social Sensitivity

Everything Is Not Enough touches on several social issues which Asher addresses delicately and sensitively. The idea for the book sprang from a talk show about a young woman who had been physically abused by her boyfriend. Initially, Asher was going to set the story around the girl, but it seemed too grim. Instead the girl became Traci, the character of the subplot, and a part of the world from which Michael's parents are trying to protect him. The submissive personality of the battered Traci and the violent behavior of Pete are explored, but the focus is on how Michael and Linda come to terms with the problem. Asher does not present simple solutions where there are none, but allows the characters to discover that they cannot help someone who does not want to change.

Drinking alcohol at parties is a behavior that Michael sees and in which he has indulged, although he knows it was wrong of him. Again the author does not preach on the issue, but instead shows Michael's remorse that he lied to his mother about drinking.

Pete's drinking bouts are also mentioned as a method he employs to offset depression. Michael's reaction is to wonder why anyone would tolerate such ugly behavior.

Although Michael never utters a cuss word, Linda uses "damn" and "hell" on the rare occasion when she is pushed too far. This usage is not overdone, but effectively conveys Linda's frustration and adds emphasis to the realistic dialogue.

Literary Qualities

Although Asher deals with delicate issues in *Everything Is Not Enough*, she cleverly balances humor and seriousness while telling her story. Instead of centering on the issue of physical abuse or separation from parental goals, she focuses on the characters of Michael and Linda and on how they deal with these problems. In a straightforward style told in the first person from Michael's point of view, Asher captures the voice of a teen-age boy looking for answers. Through Michael's thoughts the reader can understand the boredom of another summer like all the others and the restless spirit that forces him to make changes. The reader can also feel the swift mood changes that teen-agers experience.

Full character development is an Asher trademark. With Michael wanting a chance at his own life and Buddy satisfied with the life he has been given, Asher could have settled for black and white stereotypes. Instead, her insights create people with a blending of good and bad traits. The various shades-of-gray characters are bright, believable, and funny.

Asher's realistic dialogue and tight plotting make for a fast-paced narrative. The issue of physical abuse, in particular, creates suspense as Michael takes steps toward maturity.



Themes and Characters

The summer people and winter people in Braden's Port do not socialize.

The winter people resent their dependence on the summer people, and the summer people look down on the winter people as providers of services. But during the summer before his senior year in high school, Michael Paeglis crosses the boundary between those who vacation at the seaside and those who live there year-round.

Michael is a boy with everything, looking for something more. His life has been mapped out by his parents, and it is a life very much like their own, but better. Yet, Michael does not want to get a business degree and go to work for his father's jewelry stores. He likes working with people and would like to be a social worker, helping people with their problems, not working behind a counter with hard, cold gems.

Michael's friend Buddy, actually Buford Rensen the Third, is content with the life his parents have provided for him. He believes the world does not work very well. Some of his own life is out of order, but overall it is a good one, and he sees no reason to alter it by taking chances. Linda Kenney, a winter person, is a waitress at the Jolly Mackerel. She dreams of leaving Braden's Port to make a life for herself in New York as a fashion designer, and she has the determination to make that dream a reality. Only a year older than Michael, she has worked two jobs for years in order to save money for her big chance. In pursuing her dream, she has alienated her family and friends who do not understand her goal. Traci Lange is another winter person and witness to her mother's physical abuse by her father. Because of her background, she believes that being ignored is worse than being beaten up, and she becomes involved in a relationship with her boyfriend Pete that is similar to that of her parents. All she wants is to be loved, by her parents or by Pete.

If abuse is the price of love, she accepts it. Pete Clark works as a cook at the Jolly Mackerel. He was the best athlete who ever came out of Braden's Port.

After his last football game for the high school, his jersey number was retired.

He was sent off to college amid great cheers, but he came back before a year passed. He was used to being a hero, and in college he was merely another freshman trying to make the team. He gets drunk on occasion and physically abuses Traci.

The adults in this novel are as clearly drawn as the teen-age characters.

Michael believes his mother must be clairvoyant, for she can read his and his father's moods and communicate with a look. Michael's father is proud of his success in life and wants to give that life to his son. Mr. MacElroy, owner of the fish restaurant, is also a self-made man, and he believes in giving people chances again and again to prove themselves.



This coming-of-age story can give hope to young adult readers that they, like Michael, can gain control of their lives. The theme of loosening parental ties and striking out alone is a major concern to adolescents. Asher balances the difficulty of communication within families with the constant need of adolescents for emotional support. Michael does not want to hurt his parents by pursuing his own life. However, he feels like a human sponge, sucking in but not giving back, because he owes his parents for everything in his life.

By getting his own job, he takes a step away from their plan for his life and a step toward his own independence.

Still, he needs their approval. His nervousness when his parents visit the restaurant to see him at work, underscores his desire for them to be proud of what he has achieved on his own.

Parental relationships with their children are explored for all of the major characters. Buddy is content to use his father's life and money. Linda alienates her parents by wanting to leave the area. Linda's sister buckled down under her parent's wishes for her to get married and live in the same town. Her dream of becoming an artist has vanished, and she and her parents bicker daily and do not know why. Traci's mother does nothing to discourage Traci's masochistic involvement with Pete, because that is the only type of life she has known herself. Pete's parents view him as a major disappointment and embarrassment to them.

In each case the problem is one of not communicating or making reasonable choices.

The paradox of asking too much of a person by giving him or her too much is another theme. Michael feels that his father is asking too much when he expects him to join the family business.

Yet, his father feels he is giving a great opportunity to Michael. Eventually, Mr. Paeglis understands that receiving a reward without earning it is harmful.

Asher draws a parallel to this theme with the character of former athlete Pete Clark. Mr. MacElroy explains that the town's hero worship of Pete was giving him too much. They killed him with kindness. In no fashion could he live up to their expectations.

In an underlying theme, Michael and Linda learn that they cannot help someone who does not want to change.

Pete is on a downward spiral, but only he can stop the fall. Linda cannot help Traci, because Traci has chosen not to accept help. Realizing there is a limit to helping people is sometimes difficult for young people to understand. In this novel, each of the characters has to make choices for his own life, even if the choice is to go along with what someone else has chosen for him, rather than making his own independent choices for how to live.



Topics for Discussion

1. Michael knows that his father could fix his car in a minute, but he never asks him to. Why?
2. Michael and Linda both have doubts about their choices. Life would be easier if they gave in to others' choices for them and did not work for what they wanted. Both overcome their doubt. What does this say about their personalities?
3. How does Michael feel about his parents having lunch at the Jolly Mackerel? What does he imagine could happen? Why is he nervous?
4. Michael finds it easier to understand why a father would run away from the pain of his son dying than why Traci would stay to face pain.
Why?
5. A teacher once told Linda that we do not get what we deserve, but what we think we deserve. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
6. Why did Linda not write back to the teacher?
7. This novel is about making choices. What choices did each of the major characters make and why?
8. Linda and Michael learn that they cannot help someone who does not want their help. Do you agree? Why?
9. After Michael tells his parents about wanting to become a social worker, his father begins reading about psychology. What does this reveal about Mr. Paeglis's character?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Michael feels that Buddy's and his lives are locked-in-place. Buddy believes they were born lucky. Compare and contrast the feelings of these two characters in the first chapter. Why do they have such differing views?

2. Michael's confrontation with his parents about his future leaves his father angry and hurt. Put yourself in the father's position and relate the confrontation from his point of view.

3. Mr. Paeglis says he is not asking anything of Michael, he is giving. Michael believes they are the same thing.

Explain this paradox. Can you find examples of this from real life?

4. Contrast the winter and the summer people and their dependence on each other.

5. Traci is a victim of physical abuse.

The Dollmeyer twins face a different type of abuse. What sort of person is their father and what is his effect on them?

6. Linda needs Michael to hold on to the kite string. What does she mean by this?

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Review. *Kirkus Reviews* (February 1, 1987). Favorable review touting Asher's characterization and solid plotting.

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Straub, Deborah A., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. *New Revision Series*. Volume 22. Detroit: Gale, 1988. Presents a brief biography and career highlights.

Unsworth, Robert E. Review. *School Library Journal* (August 1987): 88-89.

Unsworth believes Michael's father learned the most from the summer experiences.

Related Titles

In all of Asher's young adult novels, she treats serious problems facing teenagers—strains in parent-child or sibling relations and perceptions of change and loss. Yet the overriding tone of each novel is comic with the focus on the young person confronting the problem and not on the problem to be solved. Her books record adolescents interacting with each other and taking steps toward maturity.



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