

All I Have in This World

A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion



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A man and a woman meet in a used car lot and decide, after knowing each other for less than an hour, to buy a used car together. I woke up with the image in the middle of the night, and I got up to write it down. I thought it was a story rather than a novel. But it died a painful and ugly death in storyhood, along about page seven. I don't believe in writer's block: I believe in coming at an image, stalled but strong enough to keep needling me, from some other angle. Soon after I started this story I had a semester off from my teaching job in North Carolina, and since I have been spending part of the year in Texas for the past half dozen years, I headed to Texas to write. Not to Austin, where I now live part of the year, but to West Texas, a place I knew only through a couple of visits.

I had assumed, in the first drafts of the story, that this car lot was in North Carolina. I've set work in other places than my native state—Chicago, Montana, Seattle, Virginia—but the brunt of my seven previous books have been rooted in the North Carolina coastal plain, a place I know down to the nutrients in its soil. In West Texas I rented a one-room adobe apartment that looked out upon high desert and ranchland and,

in the far distance, a ridge of mountains clearly visible even though someone told me they were nearly seventy miles away. One morning a few days after I arrived, I got up in the middle of the night and went to work. By noon the woman in the car lot was from West Texas and had returned there after years in the Pacific Northwest to confront a decade-old tragedy that caused her to flee friends, family, and home. The next day I had another ten pages about a man on the lam after losing his family's four-hundred-year-old farm who hesitates in a small town in West Texas on his way to hide out in Mexico.

During the next twenty-seven days, in shifts sometimes totaling eighteen hours, I did what I always do when writing anything: I asked myself, over and over, in as many ways as the question can be applied, Why? Why would these people do such a rash, foolhardy thing? What happened to them before they showed up in that car lot that led them to take such a chance? Was it the indifference of the long-suffering and the self-destructive that drove them to pool their meager savings and say yes, let's give this a shot? Or were they driven by optimism, the blind belief that one's fate is alterable through the smallest offering of faith and trust?

Outside the adobe walls, the desert and ranchland stretched fifty miles to the Mexican border. It was nearly autumn and parched. East Coast early fall lushness and the nearly year-round heat and humidity of central Texas is all I have ever known. The hues of tan, brown, and blond, the dust and sand and rock, the cacti and creosote, the wind that blows down across the plain states from Canada with scarcely a forest to stop it, all became essential parts of the story. At first there

wasn't much variety in that place to my untrained eye, but in time I began to understand that I—and my characters—were inhabiting a landscape whose beauty lay in what it only *appeared* to lack. What better location for a story of second chances, a tale of two people whose lives, scorched by past trauma and bad decisions, intersect in a place where one must relearn how to see?

The beauty beyond those adobe walls was bountiful, but I was aware also of the threat of things foreign to me lurking about: rattlesnakes and tarantulas on the road where I ran daily, scorpions in the bathroom, wolf spiders underfoot in the kitchen. Dangers of a less physical kind were present everywhere and always in the novel, and those dangers—particularly the risk of failure, of hurt—were necessary to render plausible this story about the deepest bond we can share, the thing that must precede, and is essential to sustain, every human interaction, especially love: hard-earned, unalterable trust. And so, somewhere in West Texas, a man and a woman met in a used car lot and decided, after knowing each other for less than an hour, to buy a used car together. I did not realize, until I had finished and rewritten the book several times, just how far that car would take these strangers, and how little, in the end, their journey had to do with the car.

Questions for Discussion

1. *All I Have in This World* juxtaposes sections focusing on characters who have some connection to the sky-blue Electra and sections focusing on the present owners, Marcus and Maria. How do the chapters about the past history of the car relate to the present-day narrative?
2. Most of the book is set in Texas, but there are detours to North Carolina, Indiana, and Ohio. What is the relationship of landscape to character and theme in the novel? What other contemporary novels have you enjoyed in which the landscape was so integral to the plotline?
3. Why do you think the author chose to make Marcus a Venus flytrap farmer, and what does that say about Marcus' character?
4. To what extent is *All I Have in This World* really about a car?
5. At one point in the novel, Maria and Marcus take a rafting trip down the Comal River. What happens to Marcus on that rafting trip?

6. Marcus is fleeing from his past, while Maria is returning home to confront her own; you might say that they meet in the middle. What does each gain from the other?
7. At one point, Marcus composes a letter to Maria in which he writes, “There’s something about the perfectly good things that people get rid of that increases their value, you know? Especially if there is a lot of use left in them and you are lucky enough to realize it” (page 183). Marcus is talking about the music he leaves behind in the car, but how might his statement apply to other situations and characters in the novel?
8. What do Maria and her mother come to understand about each other?
9. The reader is asked to willingly believe that two strangers would decide, after knowing each other less than an hour, to buy a used car together. In what ways does the author prepare the reader for what Coleridge called “the willing suspension of disbelief”? How does the novel’s structure (i.e., the back stories of the two main characters as well as the intervening chapters concerning the car) influence the reader’s acceptance of this impulsive but necessary act?
10. There are several lists and letters in the novel. What thematic role do these written documents play in the story? How do they help you to better understand the characters?