

BOOK CLUB To Go!

All the Numbers

By Judy Merrill Larsen

Introduction

"How much do you love me?" Daniel asked his mother. "I love you all the numbers." What begins as a sunny August afternoon on a bucolic lake turns into a tragedy when a Jet Ski swerves fatally close to shore. It's a day Ellen Banks could never have prepared for, a day no mother should ever have to live through. The moment her son James is killed, Ellen must face the unimaginable while trying to remain strong for her older son, Daniel, who witnessed the fateful accident and blames himself. Ellen's shock and grief soon give way to defiance as lawyers and policemen who once vowed to support Ellen's desire for justice succumb to political pressure and back away. Still, Ellen is determined to see the reckless young man pay for his crime and to heal her family's deep wounds. But first she must heal herself. An unforgettable journey of power and emotion, *All the Numbers* poignantly depicts a woman's reckoning with her own vulnerability and finding in the wisdom of motherhood the redemptive grace to begin again.

(barnesandnoble.com)

About the Author

Judith Merrill Larsen grew up moving across the country every four years or so. She was born in Whittier, California, then traveled to Northbrook, IL (explains her baseball allegiance), Upper Saddle River, NJ (explains her passion for Springsteen), back to Northbrook, then to Dunwoody, GA (where she learned to appreciate the cadence of her favorite writers). Finally, she landed in Madison, WI for college and discovered home.

Larsen now lives in St. Louis, MO with her husband, five kids, a really sweet (but very dumb) golden retriever and a diabetic cat.

Over the years Larsen has worked as a waitress, grocery checker, copy center clerk, deli clerk, sales clerk, substitute teacher, and English teacher.

(judymerrilllarsen.com)

Author Interview by Bev Marshall

Marshall: I've already told you how much I loved *All the Numbers*, but I didn't tell you that I actually stayed up until three A.M. reading it. I just couldn't go to sleep until I knew what was going to happen to poor Ellen.

Larsen: Well, I'd say I'm sorry you lost sleep, but I'm not. What a thrill to know you couldn't put it down.

Marshall: I'd bet I wasn't the only reader you kept up late, and I'd also wager that I wasn't the only one who wants to know if this was an account of a personal experience. Have you suffered the loss of a child?

Larsen: Thank God, no. But I think most parents have had those scary trips to the emergency room when you hope your child just needs a few stitches or those moments of terror when your toddler is lost in a crowd, and you try to remember what he was wearing. As a mother, one of the most frightening moments I had was when my first grader was hit by a car. I was frozen for a few seconds. I didn't want to run out and check on him because I was so scared of what I might have to face. He turned out to be fine, but of course I didn't know that yet.

Marshall: Thank God for that! So was your son's accident the inspiration for *All the Numbers*?

Larsen: Not exactly. I think I'd been dreaming it up for years—ever since I became a mother and learned that overwhelming, awful truth of how much I loved my sons, how much I wanted to protect them, and how in so many ways I was powerless.

(randomhouse.com)

Reviews

"Judy Merrill Larsen's *All The Numbers* is sure to join Judy Guest's novel *Ordinary People*, and Jacqueline Mitchard's *The Deep End of the Ocean* as one of the most talked-about books of its time. This powerful story of tragedy, grief, and redemptive love haunted me long after I read the final uplifting yet heartbreaking words." —Cassandra King

'*All The Numbers*' is a 'five-hankie' novel...I don't think I have ever read a more emotionally stirring book than *All The Numbers* by Judy Merrill Larsen. In her publishing debut, Merrill Larsen pulls the reader's heart strings with her story of tragedy, grief, rage, and, finally, healing. —Joyce Laabs—*The Lakeland Times*

(judymerrilllarsen.com)

Further Reading

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon

Mirror Mirror by Gregory Maguire

The Shining by Stephen King

Patty Jane's House of Curl by Lorna Landvik

Finger Lickin' Fifteen (Stephanie Plum Series #15) by Janet Evanovich

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. One of the surprising moments in *All the Numbers* is Ellen's internal debate about organ donation. Were you surprised by her reaction when organ donation was suggested? Do you feel her reaction was realistic?
2. In the novel, Ellen is criticized for giving an interview to the media before the trial. Did you agree that she should have remained silent or did you feel the interview was appropriate? How influential do you feel the media is in our justice system?
3. Ellen clearly struggles with her romantic interest in Bob. Do you think she is unfair to him? Both Bob and Ellen recognize that they met because of James' death. Whose argument seems more convincing to you-Bob's or Ellen's?
4. Who or what do you think is most responsible for Ellen's change of heart regarding Ben Buchanan? Her mother's words seem to fall on deaf ears throughout most of the book-do they finally get through to her or is it seeing Ben's mom or running into Melanie? Or something else?
5. Does Ellen's position as a single mother make her more vulnerable? Does any of her anger with Ben Buchanan seem to get mixed up with her anger at Tim, her ex-husband?
6. The lake house is first introduced as Ellen's "happiest place"- and even the boys see it that way. Does that increase the horror of James' accident both for the reader and for Ellen? Do you think she would have the same desire for revenge if the accident had happened elsewhere?
7. When the defense attorney's first throw accusations at Ellen, she is stunned and mad at Bob that he didn't see it coming. Did you have any sense that she would be blamed? Do you fault her or feel that she has to bear some of the responsibility?

8. Ellen is very lucky to have good friends who have clearly sustained her over the years, and that continues with James' accident and death. What do you think their view of the trial is? Anna especially seems to stay out of the argument-do you get any hints as to whether she agrees with Ellen's mother that Ellen is being too punitive or aggressive with Ben? Do you think she is?
9. The relationship between Ellen and her son Daniel goes through some real changes. How do you imagine their relationship six months after the final scene?
10. How do you think Daniel would feel about Bob and Ellen dating? How did Ellen's grief affect her relationship with Daniel? What other factors were affecting their relationship?
11. How did you feel about Ellen's treatment of Daniel after James' death?

(randomhouse.com)