



## The Anti-Romantic Child

By Priscilla Gilman  
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### Introduction

Priscilla Gilman, a teacher of romantic poetry who embraced Wordsworth's vision of childhood's spontaneous wonder, eagerly anticipated the birth of her first child, certain that he would come "trailing clouds of glory." But as Benjamin grew, his remarkable precocity was associated with a developmental disorder that would dramatically alter the course of Priscilla's dreams. In *The Anti-Romantic Child*, a memoir full of lyricism and light, Gilman explores our hopes and expectations for our children, our families, and ourselves—and the ways in which experience may lead us to re-imagine them. Using literature as a touchstone, Gilman reveals her journey through crisis to joy, illuminating the flourishing of life that occurs when we embrace the unexpected. *The Anti-Romantic Child* is a profoundly moving and compellingly universal book about family, parenthood, and love.

### Questions for Discussion

1. In its largest sense, *The Anti-Romantic Child* is about grappling with the difference between expectation and reality; it tells a story of how to move through loss, disappointment, and crisis to a place of resilience, blessings, and joy. How have you had to reconcile fantasy with reality in your own life? What things in your life have turned out differently than you expected them to? How is the life you actually have different than the life you had imagined? How have you coped with the disjunction between expectation and actuality? What helps Priscilla accept and joyfully embrace what is rather than what was hoped for or dreamed of?
2. Despite the fact that Benjamin is a profoundly gifted child with special needs, countless reviewers and readers have cited the universality of Priscilla and Benj's story, declaring that *The Anti-Romantic Child* is "a book every parent should read." How are the experiences, concerns and situations Priscilla faces with Benjamin common to all parents? How are Priscilla's hopes, disappointments, worries, and joys universal to the parenting experience? How is the story of Benjamin's challenges, setbacks, and ultimate triumphs a representative story of a child's growth and blossoming? How can *The Anti-Romantic Child* help and inspire you in your own parenting experience?
3. Discuss the book's title and subtitle. What does Priscilla mean by "anti-romantic"? By the book's end, is Benjamin actually anti-romantic or is the book's title in some way ironic? How does the subtitle qualify or transform your sense of the title? Why do you think Priscilla calls her story one of "unexpected joy"? What does "joy" mean to Priscilla? To you? Is it the same thing as happiness? How can Priscilla's experience and perspective help you to see and appreciate unexpected joy?
4. *The Anti-Romantic Child* is not just a book about being a mother, it is also a book about being a daughter and a grandchild. Discuss Priscilla's relationships with her father, her mother, and her grandmother, and how they influenced and shaped her. How is Priscilla similar to and different from these three crucial and formative adults? How does Priscilla preserve strong bonds with both of her parents after their acrimonious split from each other? How is Priscilla's mother's relationship with her first grandchild, Benj, similar to and different from her relationships with her daughters? What do Priscilla's mother and Benj have in common and how do they help each other to grow?
5. Marriage and divorce are large themes of *The Anti-Romantic Child*. Priscilla describes the loss of her own childhood idyll with her parents' bitter divorce and writes poignantly about her falling in love with her future husband and with heart-wrenching honesty about the crumbling of their marriage and her agonized decision to divorce. How did Priscilla's and Richard's experiences in childhood affect their ideals about marriage and family? How did having children influence their relationship and their sense of each other? Once they decided to split, how did they work to avoid the devastation Priscilla's parents' divorce had caused? What did their story say to you about the nature and possibilities of romantic love, marriage, divorce, and family after divorce?
6. *The Anti-Romantic Child* is a book about teaching and learning, about a professor whose greatest teacher was her own child, about the nature and value of education. How does Priscilla change as a teacher after she becomes a mother? How does she come to question the educational system that produced her? What role do schools play in her life, and in Benj's? What does Benjamin teach Priscilla? What have your children, students, or loved ones taught you?
7. Priscilla worried intensely about Benj from the moment he was born, but over and over again, she was repeatedly reassured or talked out of her concerns by her pediatrician, her husband, and her mother. When she finally realized that she had in fact been right all along, how did she keep herself from blaming those who had dismissed her concerns and instead work collaboratively with them to encourage Benj's growth? How did she develop into a fierce and effective advocate for Benj's needs? What does her story tell us about the importance of trusting our instincts and standing up for our loved ones and ourselves? How does Priscilla model ways of advocating for one's children in ways that are firm and strong and effective but not adversarial or hostile? How does she get results?
8. In what ways did Priscilla help Benj to thrive by focusing on his strengths rather than on trying to fix him? How did she encourage his caregivers, teachers, and family members to do the same? What does the story of Benj's growth teach you about strengths-based learning and how to look at people in terms of what they can do rather than what they can't, who they are rather than who we want or expect them to be? Did you come away from *The Anti-Romantic Child* with a greater appreciation of difference, diversity, and individuality?
9. At one point in her book, Priscilla quotes these lines from the poet ee cummings: "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best day and night to make you every body else means to fight the hardest battle which any human can fight and never stop fighting"

and says that her "goal as a mother is to never stop fighting that battle for Benj's essential self and to teach him how to fight it on his own behalf." Discuss the importance of individuality and appreciation for uniqueness in Priscilla's life, book, perspective. How have you fought the battle Cummings describes in your own life?

10. Priscilla writes: "I didn't want to think of Benj in terms of syndromes and categories and labels and diagnoses, in terms of his performance on tests and evaluations, in terms of his differences from a perceived norm or imagined ideal." How does Priscilla refuse to let Benj be stereotyped by his diagnoses? How does she strive to understand and support "the complex, intricate person" that he is? What does her book say about the merits and disadvantages of labels? The emphasis on test scores in our current educational culture? The nature of identity?

11. In its opening pages, Priscilla calls *The Anti-Romantic Child* "a book about the relationship between literature and life." What is that relationship as expressed in and by Priscilla's memoir? What did you think of the poetry interspersed throughout the book? How did the poetry support and enhance the narrative's tone, themes, message, resonance? Why and how did the great Romantic poet William Wordsworth speak so powerfully to Priscilla? How have books or poems, pieces of music or works of art, movies or plays or other imaginative creations sustained, comforted, enlightened, or inspired you in your life? If you had to pick one author to allude to, quote from, and use creatively in your own memoir, which writer would it be and why?

12. In the book's opening pages, Priscilla calls her memoir "a love story: a story of two very different people learning to accept and affect and make space for each other in mysterious and powerful ways." What has *The Anti-Romantic Child* taught you about the nature of love? How can the relationship that Benj and Priscilla have forged with each other serve as a model not just for the parent-child relationship but for all kinds of human connection? Has Priscilla's book helped you to see your child, or your friend, or the parent of a child you teach, in a new light?

13. Towards the end of her memoir, Priscilla writes: "Being Benj's mother has changed me profoundly" and put me in touch with my "deepest sense of what's truly meaningful." How do Priscilla's values and priorities change as a result of being Benj's mother? How does she grow with her son? As a result of her experience with Benj, Priscilla changes her career direction and her life path in dramatic and striking ways. Did you agree with her choices? How have experiences in your personal life influenced your professional life or vice versa? How did Priscilla turn her challenges into opportunities for growth? How have challenges in your life helped put you in touch with your deepest sense of what's truly meaningful? What milestones mattered to Priscilla? What milestones or achievements in your child's life or in your own life have mattered most to you? Will you think differently about what makes a life worthwhile after reading Priscilla's book?

14. Discuss why the unexpected, surprises, revelations, and mystery are so important to this book.

#### **About the Author**

Priscilla Gilman grew up in New York City and is a former professor of English literature at Yale University and Vassar College. She has taught poetry appreciation to inmates in a restorative justice program and to New York City public school students. *The Anti-Romantic Child*, her first book, was excerpted in Newsweek magazine and featured on the cover of its international edition; it was an NPR Morning Edition Must-Read, Slate's Book of the Week, and selected as one of the Best Books of 2011 by the Leonard Lopate Show. Gilman writes regularly for publications including *The Daily Beast*, the *New York Times*, and the *Huffington Post*, speaks frequently at schools, conferences, and organizations about parenting, education, and the arts, and is a Scholar/Facilitator for the New York Council for the Humanities. She lives in New York City with her family. *The Anti-Romantic Child* has been nominated for a Books for a Better Life Award for Best First Book.