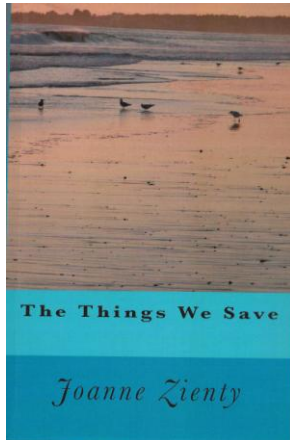




The Things We Save

By Joanne Zienty



About the Book

A broken 45 rpm record held together with adhesive tape, a fading stack of Polaroids, a cobalt blue perfume bottle, and a braid of human hair ... these are just some of the things Claire Sokol keeps stashed in an old Marshall Field's gift box. But how did they get there and what do they signify? If these relics could talk, what stories would they tell? The tale of a child torn between the bitter sermons of a troubled, troublesome mother and the honeyed praise of the beautiful, sophisticated woman who just might be her fairy godmother? Of an innocent girl and boy lost in a dark, forbidding forest of adult lies and deceit? Of a young woman fighting to save a beloved father from his worst enemy – himself? Of a young man's death, a tragedy from which to flee or a mystery to finally solve?

The Things We Save tells the story of the ways, both subtle and brutal, that a family falls apart and the intimate struggle to put what remains back together. It asks provocative questions about the nature of love, the corrosive effects of envy and guilt, and the limits of forgiveness. *The Things We Save* is for anyone who has ever slammed out a door with the vow to never return, only to find his or her way back home again.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. What is the significance of the novel's title, *The Things We Save* in relation to its theme?
2. Claire Sokol, the novel's protagonist, is, by turns, snarky, angry, vulnerable and conflicted. What was your first impression of the protagonist/narrator of this novel? What did you find the most engaging aspect of her character? Did you find any aspect of her off-putting?



- 3.** What was your first impression of Claire’s father, Joe? Because you see him almost entirely from Claire’s perspective, was there a chance to see him as a sympathetic character before Claire finds him so? Do you think Claire’s perspective about Joe is reliable or not?
- 4.** Discuss Claire’s mother, Mary, and her relationship with each of her children. What was your opinion of her character?
- 5.** One of the largest subjects of the book is grief and how families and individuals go through the grief process. First, Claire’s beloved older brother drowns. How does this affect the family dynamics (both the nuclear family and the extended Sokol family) and the relationship between Claire’s parents? Later, Claire’s mother commits suicide. How do the characters differ in their ability to rebound from these traumas? How do the choices they make in the aftermath of tragedy influence the future?
- 6.** Claire’s aunt-by-marriage, Peach, plays a pivotal role in the novel. What are her motivations for becoming involved in Claire’s life? Is she, initially, a good role model? How does Claire’s guilt over her relationship with Peach impact all her other relationships: with her cousin Jamie, with her father, with her lover, Aaron and with her daughter, Tally?
- 7.** After her mother’s death, Claire’s relationship with Peach changes, particularly after the graduation party fiasco of Chapter 16. She states that “her mother had lost the battle. I vowed to win the war,” although she realizes that “Jamie would be the pawn.” How culpable is Claire in the tragic events that follow?
- 8.** Compare and contrast Jamie’s feelings for Claire with hers toward him and how they evolve over the course of the novel.
- 9.** The mystery of Jamie’s death is—in the end—never really solved. Was it a suicide? An accident? Does it matter in terms of the resolution of the novel?
- 10.** Claire, by her own admission, can be a difficult person to love. Yet it would appear that the men in her life—her father, Jamie, Aaron, and Kevin “Strawboy”—believe that their relationships with her are worth saving. Why? Do their experiences reflect on the nature of unconditional love? Compare and contrast these relationships with the relationships that women have in the novel.
- 11.** For all of their faults, is the Sokol clan a likeable or relatable group of people? Who did you like the most, and who did you find the least appealing, and why? Were there any characters you would have liked to see developed further?
- 12.** Throughout the book, the author references the story of Hansel and Gretel, both literally and metaphorically. Discuss the way these references acted as elements of foreshadowing and symbolism throughout the narrative. Consider, too, how they reflect Claire’s emotional state as the novel progresses.



Author Bio

Joanne Zienty was named the first winner of the “Soon to Be Famous Illinois Author Project” for her debut novel, *The Things We Save*. She is a teacher-librarian for an elementary school and lives and works in the suburbs of Chicago. She also writes two blogs: ***From the Ridiculous to the Sublime*** and ***Adventures in Library Land***. Visit her at www.joannezienty.com or www.adventuresinlibraryland.com.

Critical Praise

“A well-plotted, lyrical novel filled with the harsh emotions of a family torn apart by death.” — **Kirkus Reviews** (October 28, 2011/November 15, 2011)

“Readers will be drawn into this intense and compelling family saga and rewarded with an emotionally satisfying conclusion.” — **Booklist Online** (May 20, 2014)

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