

When All Else Fails

Michael Pulley

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In the drama-filled novel When All Else Fails, redemption comes from unlikely places for a group of damaged people.

In Michael Pulley's novel *When All Else Fails*, a wealthy, dysfunctional family's interests collide with those of a college tennis coach and three student athletes at a conservative Christian university.

Louis and Arlette are a wealthy suburban Midwestern couple. Arlette resents her husband's newfound Christian faith, which conflicts with her social life and drinking habits. Their oldest daughter, Michelle, heads to Redfern College on a tennis scholarship. There, she revels in her newfound freedom—though she's still somewhat supervised by her coach, David. She falls for Abe, a fellow tennis player who's Algerian. She also befriends Clovis, her zealous roommate. Through a series of affairs, a church bombing, and a childbirth, this cache of damaged personalities intersects in comical and bizarre ways until, through a shared experience, they all come to individual revelations and epiphanies.

Louis, Arlette, David, and Michelle are centered, with Clovis and Abe often appearing in scenes that function as distractions. Still, these secondary characters can be more involving than the central four: Louis is controlling, arrogant, and greedy; Arlette is miserable, self-indulgent, and engages in an affair; and David prioritizes his own interests over those of others for most of the book. Though Michelle is constructed in somewhat more sympathetic terms, she also makes some questionable decisions.

Paced to reveal secrets at key moments, the storyline is marked by intrigue and mysteries. It includes shady business dealings and sexual indiscretions. Some of its substantial dramas occur within the span of a few days, though, straining credulity. Still, the events build on one another well. The book's intermittent comedic elements are less successful; they appear to the best effect in the course of characters' conversations, which are witty and revealing, mixing satirical elements into the book's melodramatic interactions. However, these exchanges also run too long.

The book also overindulges in adverbs, distracting character nicknames, and heavy head-hopping. These qualities undermine its progression; the story's center is lost among such unnecessary flourishes. And the book is also prone to overexplaining its characters' motivations, eliminating any mystery behind their actions. Ultimately, there are too few surprises throughout the book to sustain interest in its tale.

In the novel *When All Else Fails*, redemption comes from unlikely places for a group of damaged people.

N.T. MCQUEEN (December 28, 2023)

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