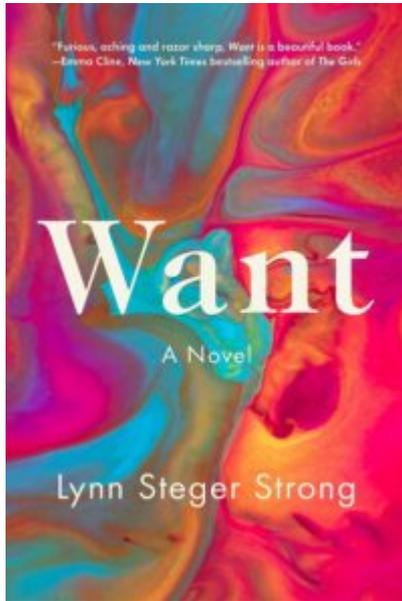


# [Living Within the Systems: Lynn Steger Strong's \*Want\*](#)

written by Guest Contributor | October 12, 2020



*Want* by Lynn Steger Strong  
Henry Holt & Company, July 2020  
224 pages / [Bookshop](#) / [B&N](#) / [Amazon](#)

I haven't read anything quite as urgently powerful as Lynn Steger Strong's most recent novel, *Want*. It is a narrative concerned with absence, and its messy adjacency with desire—yearning leaps off the page, twisted up with anger and resignation at the structures and systems of late-stage capitalism, bureaucracy and the complicated terrain of parent-child relationships, working in academia and friendship.

Our narrator, unnamed until almost the very end when she is revealed to be an Elizabeth, lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two young children. An Ivy League graduate, she teaches a night class as an adjunct at a prestigious university, and at a charter school in the Bronx during the day. Her husband, charming and likeable to everyone he meets, left finance after the collapse of Lehman Brothers and works in carpentry. This present, which reads as a slow unravelling saturated with the tiredness of working too much and never making enough money, gives way to the past, illuminating Elizabeth's relationship with Sasha and the knotty nuances of friendship.

The novel might have read as a rendering of modern life through the lens of privilege, but Strong's narrator isn't written in a way so as to invite pity, and our narrator is well aware of her inability to really help her students. She knows where she stands: she is a white woman with wealthy parents who is married and living in Brooklyn after graduating with a PhD from an Ivy League university. She can leave her job teaching at the high school in the middle

of the day and get away with it. Her boss likes “the feel” of her as compared to her co-teachers, who are black. She knows this.

The precarity of her life and the crux of this novel lives in the territory of class and economic means. Paying for a few drinks at a dinner would empty her account. At lunch with a friend, she says she has no way to pay for the meal. Desire plays a large part in this novel but, even more present, is lack. There is never enough for the rent, the bills, the food, the loan payments. She and her husband work desperately but still, they are drowning in debt, are without healthcare, and Elizabeth starts leaving during the work day because she can't find the fulfilment she's after, wandering into bookstores and museums.

After filing for bankruptcy and having to consider selling her husband's sperm, Elizabeth and her husband find themselves going further down the road of downward social mobility. She asks her parents for money and is met by her father who says it would be like throwing their dollars away. When Elizabeth says it would be a loan, he replies, “Don't pretend you'll be able to pay us back.” Ostensibly, she is a middle-class woman with a safety net. The actuality of her life is something else, or perhaps this is what middle-class means now, in contemporary America and New York City. Either way, Elizabeth wants something else.

The novel eschews the idea that this is about wrong choice after wrong choice and instead questions the failure of a system that allows for this sort of precarity to exist. “What do you want, though?” Elizabeth asks her husband when they are faced with moving because they can't afford to stay, though they don't have enough for a moving van and security deposit, or the promise of jobs elsewhere. She was born into a certain generation and privilege that told her to follow her dreams and that if certain boxes were checked (a good education from a good university), she would be okay. Her husband replies to her question: “To pay our rent, he says. To take care of our kids.”

When her mother asks, “At what point is it time to give up on this whole dream thing?” Elizabeth is lost. What dream? Is this the new American dream? Managing to pay the rent without constantly being on the brink of losing everything? Not having to file for bankruptcy?

As America handles the current health crisis, the gulf between the wealthiest and the least is perhaps more obvious than ever, the foundational structures of capitalism in relation to healthcare and inequality are held up to the light more so as usual. Yet, Strong wrote this novel well before COVID-19. “My body single-handedly bankrupted us,” Elizabeth says. She had to have a C-section after an accidental pregnancy and winds up in debt to the tune of \$30,000. She doesn't have health insurance and when she has to have crowns put in, it further adds to their worry, alongside her husband's student loans. The world written in these pages has nothing to do with a pandemic, but instead the mundanity of living like this: within structures that serve very few people. “We cannot live outside the systems and the structures, but, it turns out, I cannot live within them either anymore,” Elizabeth notes.

As I write this, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez explains her new braces on

Instagram. She couldn't afford a retainer before she was a member of Congress as she worked as a waitress and didn't have health insurance. Paying for it then would've been cheaper than her braces now, though. Healthcare is a right, says the caption, and it shouldn't be a symbol of status. It shouldn't have the capability to bankrupt us.

Our narrator's tone is a measured balance between anger at the system, despair, a desire to keep going, somehow, and a criss-cross of emotional threads concerning the wealth and privilege of her parents. The sometimes tone-deaf remarks of her "friends" who say flippantly that she should simply move and quit her job serve to highlight the way in which the stability of the middle-class is perceived or, perhaps, the simple ignorance of what it means to have the freedom to quit or move.

A radical and relevant novel, Strong's characters are constantly on the edge and at the mercy of a society that tells them if they have no money, if they are struggling, it is their own doing, their own dream-chasing that has led them here. Though Elizabeth and her husband work hard and benefit from a heavy dose of privilege, still, they are left wanting. A sharp, incisive portrait of a family in New York and the difficulties of living, *Want* is a breathlessly piercing study of desire, privilege and the systems that crumble and yet, still, continue to exist.



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