



His Whole Life by Elizabeth Hay

About the author:

Elizabeth Hay is the author of the #1 nationally bestselling novel *Alone in the Classroom*, the Scotiabank Giller Prize-winning novel *Late Nights On Air*, as well as three other award-winning works of fiction, *A Student of Weather*, *Garbo Laughs*, and *Small Change*. Formerly a radio broadcaster, she spent a number of years in Mexico and New York City before returning to Canada. She lives in Ottawa.

Source: Publisher's website (<http://penquinrandomhouse.ca/>)

About this book:

Starting with something as simple as a boy who wants a dog, *His Whole Life* takes us into a richly intimate world where everything that matters is at risk: family, nature, country, home.

At the outset, ten-year-old Jim and his Canadian mother and American father are on a journey from New York City to a lake in eastern Ontario during the last hot days of August. What unfolds is an enveloping story that spans a few pivotal years of Jim's youth and sets out competing claims on everyone's love: for Canada over New York; for a mother over a father; a friend over a husband; one son over another. With her trademark honesty, wisdom, vivid sense of place, and nuanced characters, Hay deftly charts the deepening bond between mother and son even as the family threatens to come apart.

Set in the mid-1990s, when Quebec was on the verge of leaving Canada, this captivating novel is an unconventional coming-of-age story as only Elizabeth Hay could tell it. With grace and power, she explores the mystery of how members of

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a family can hurt each other so deeply, and remember those hurts in such detail, yet find openings that shock them with love and forgiveness. This is vintage Elizabeth Hay at the height of her powers.

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Discussion Questions:

1. This book revolves around families – the relationships of parents with children, especially mothers and sons, and siblings with each other. What do you think the significance is of the epigraph from George Oppen, referring to “. . . an old dream of families dispersing into adulthood?”
2. Nan says, “Doing something terrible doesn’t define you for the rest of your life,” (p. 296) yet the characters often think and ask each other about the worst things they’ve done. Does Nan really believe what she says above? How does the past shape the various characters and their actions? Do you think worst things define people forever? And what happens if your worst thing is also your best thing?
3. The book is set at a particular moment in Canadian history. Discuss the ways the question of Quebec’s separation resonate in the novel as a whole, and why do you think the author decided to set the novel at this particular time.
4. Jim and Nan visit the Canadian Museum of Civilization and learn about the Dorset people. How does that visit and the story of the Dorset relate to Jim and Nan’s own life?



5. Nature and a sense of place are keenly important in the novel. How does a yearning for nature and home define the characters and affect the decisions they make in their lives?
6. Nan says to Jim, “The gods sweep down and change things,” (p. 8) and that there are “accidents of death and birth.” (p. 9) How does her sense of invisible and often random forces operating in the world echo in her own life?
7. Jim is often caught between his parents, an “indecisive father and over-decisive mother.” (p. 88) In what ways does Jim learn to navigate his way between them? What does he identify as his parents’ different needs? And how does he adapt his behaviour in response to them? In what ways is his relationship with his mother different from that with his father?
8. Describe Nan and Lulu’s friendship, one which has sustained itself over time. In spite of their differences, they complement each other in particular ways. Discuss.
9. At the core of Lulu’s sadness is the way in which she feels betrayed by her dying parent and her brother. Discuss the ways in which Lulu and her brother find forgiveness.
10. At one point, Jim begins typing a story and realizes he can make what he believes come true, in a certain sense. Nan tells George she loves him and wonders, “How could saying words she only half believed turn into a profound truth?” (p. 304) Discuss how it is that two opposing things can both be true and how this idea can be applied to the characters in the novel – Jim, Nan, George, Lulu.



11. Why does George not have surgery immediately upon discovering the tumour in his cheek? Is it partly, as Nan suspects, because he wants to hold on to her and their marriage? (p. 177)
12. “When you take things personally,” Nan thinks, “the world becomes very small. It is you and nothing is smaller. When you manage not to do that, the world is wide.” (p. 294) What are the ways in which the characters attempt to not take things so personally? And ways in which they aren’t successful at that?
13. In school, Jim learns the meaning of the word *metamorphosis*. What, if any, metamorphoses do the characters undergo throughout the course of the book?
14. Jim thinks, “It would always be a puzzle to him, the things he didn’t say, as if it weren’t the right moment, and the things he didn’t ask, as if he already knew the answer.” (p. 264-65) Why is that? Is the same true of the other characters? What are some of the things the characters don’t say to each other? What effect does that have? What have you not said or not asked in your life?
15. Discuss the significance of the title. The novel takes place over several years. In what ways do these years shape Jim’s life?

Source: Author’s website (<http://elizabethhay.com/>)

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