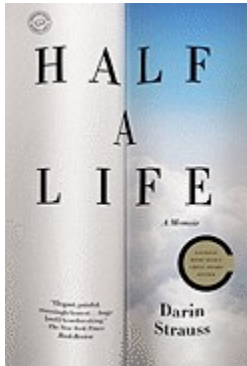


ELPL Lit Kits



Half a Life by Darin Strauss

Strauss delivers an unexpected take on remorse with the maturity that only comes from earnest reflection. The moment his car struck and killed his classmate Celine, a girl he hardly knew, half a lifetime ago, his life was understandably changed forever.

About the Authors: Darin Strauss is the author of the international bestseller "Chang and Eng" and the "New York Times" Notable Book "The Real McCoy," Also a screenwriter, he is currently adapting "Chang and Eng" with Gary Oldman. The recipient of a 2006 Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction writing, he teaches writing at New York University.

Discussion Questions:

Please be aware that this discussion guide may contain spoilers!

1. Strauss has a number of scenes (him chatting up girls at the accident site; going to the movies later) that paint him in an unfavorable color. Do you think this makes him less likeable, or more so. How effective is he in drawing your sympathy. Do you think he wants to?
2. It took Strauss half a life to write this book. How do you think it would have differed if he'd tried to write it at the time? How would it be different if he were to have waited another 18 years?
3. Strauss writes that he thought of college as a "witness protection program" – he went off to school and told basically no one about the accident. Do you think this time was necessary for him to heal, or would he have benefitted from talking about it to a lot of people, right away?
4. As serious a book as this is, there are moments of humor. Strauss pokes gentle fun at "the Shrink" – a psychologist he saw soon after the crash – and at the "On Death and Dying" class he took in college. What purpose do these incidents play in this often somber book?
5. To what degree do you think Strauss's memories were shaped by his age? How reliable is memory after almost two decades?

6. A number of reviewers wrote that, if anything, Strauss was too hard on himself in this memoir. He was found blameless, yet spent years feeling terrible about it. Is that a necessary moral stance, or could he have let himself off the hook a little more?
7. The Washington Post wrote that *Half a Life* has a universal appeal, calling it a "penetrating, thought-provoking examination of the human mind." Do you think it has a message for people beyond the narrow, car-crash one? If so, what is it?
8. Strauss's parents are quite present in the early part of the book; less so as the story progresses. Is this merely a function of the narrator growing older? How would you act differently if it'd been your child driving that fateful car on that fateful day?
9. The accident resulted in a lawsuit. Do you think there is some peace-of-mind to be gained in litigation? Is it a way to allow ourselves to try feeling better about something awful?
10. Define the relationship between Strauss and his wife, Susannah. How does she differ from the people he'd told about the crash before her?
11. Consider Strauss's choice of a career. He writes that, if not for the accident, he may not have become a writer. Does this seem true? Can we be shaped positively by terrible events? If so, how do we ensure that we are?
12. Strauss writes: "There are different brands of ignorance, the static of perplexity, the spun silk of denial." What does this mean?
13. Strauss writes that there was no real epiphanic moment for him, no instant he can point to and say: That was when I began to feel better. And yet he seems to have learned a lesson from this event, and by the end of the book is a changed man. What did he learn?