

Reading Group Guide
PINCH ME

INTRODUCTION

From the author of *29* comes a delightful, modern fairy tale about Lily Burns, a young career woman with the perfect life—until an ancient family curse threatens to take everything away. Lily has been told all her life not to marry for love. Then she meets the man of her dreams in Gogo, a handsome, successful pediatrician who wants nothing more than to marry her and make her happy for the rest of her life. But accepting his offer sends her to an alternate universe where Gogo is not only a shell of the man she knew—but he’s already married! If she’s ever going to reunite with her beloved, Lily must first discover how to break her family curse—and learn the true power of love and family bonds along the way.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. All her life, Selma and Dolly have told Lily to “never marry a man unless he’s short, bald, fat, stupid and treats you badly” (p. 2). Why do you think Lily never questioned this odd advice?
2. Dolly and Selma keep their family curse a secret from Lily until circumstances force them to reveal it. Why do they hide the curse for so long? What are they protecting her from?
3. When Gogo is first described, he has perfect looks (p. 13) and is a perfect fit for Lily (p. 19). His proposal, on the Eiffel Tower in Paris, is incredibly romantic. Did Gogo seem like a realistic character at first? How did that perception change when Lily describes Gogo’s not-so-perfect characteristics (pp. 124-137) later in the story?
4. Astrid and Emmalina’s parents doted on the spoiled Astrid and, by comparison, treated the quiet, accepting Emmalina poorly. Do you think parental treatment is that unequal between real siblings?
5. *Pinch Me* has been described as a modern day fairy tale. How does it compare to the classic fairy tales you learned?
6. *Pinch Me* features a curse and alternate realities. What effect does it have on your belief—or suspension of disbelief—in the story?
7. The story’s curse—to never be able to marry for love—causes emotional pain for Lily and her family. However, in the alternate reality Lily makes a wonderful friend in her long-lost cousin Rose. Could Lily have broken the curse without

Rose's help? Are there any other benefits to the curse? What does it teach Lily about her family and the strength of her love?

8. Lily shows incredible tenacity in her efforts to break the curse, even when all hope seems lost. Could you have been as persistent as Lily?
9. Lily's choice to marry Gogo—and go directly against the advice of her mother and grandmother—brings on the curse. In order to break it, she must go further than they, and many generations before her, were able to. What does that say about the importance of following your own heart?
10. Selma and Dolly have suffered heartbreak time and time again because of the curse. As a coping mechanism Dolly cooks up a storm and Selma exercises almost constantly. Yet, despite their loss and struggles, both manage to keep a strong sense of humor. How does that help them? If you were in their situation, what would be your outlet?
11. Lily finds and fights to keep true love. Have you ever struggled to find love? Keep it?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Learn more about Adena Halpern on her website, www.adenahalpern.com. You can link through to her Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and Goodreads pages. Use her website's comment section to ask Adena a question or to tell her about your meeting.
2. Lily uses ancestry.com to find her relatives, eventually locating her cousin Rose, who becomes a great friend. Log on to see if you have any long-lost family members in your lineage. Or, try starting a family tree with the help of family members. Share any interesting discoveries with your group.
3. Central to the curse in *Pinch Me* is the “ill-fated chocolate chip cookie recipe.” Bake your own “well-fated chocolate chip cookies” to bring to your next book club meeting!
4. If you enjoyed reading *Pinch Me*, check out Adena Halpern's other novels: *29* and *The Ten Best Days of My Life*. You can also read her memoir *Target Underwear and a Vera Wang Gown: Notes from a Single Girl's Closet*.

A CONVERSATION WITH ADENA HALPERN

1. With your own website and a presence on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and Goodreads, you are clearly very active online. How does interacting with your fans online compare to meeting them in person at book signings or other events?

I love having an online presence to meet and keep in touch with fans. I have “met” so many amazing people from all over the world who I never would have met at a book signing. In addition, thanks to the internet, I’ve received so many kind letters and have written back and forth with fans who might otherwise been unable to contact me.

One of my favorite things to do is to go on Skype and speak at book clubs. It’s always a blast to hear people’s comments about the book and what they liked or wanted to see more of. In fact, the idea for *Pinch Me* actually came partly from talking to fans who wanted to read my take on a fairy tale romance.

2. Your first two novels, *The Ten Best Days of my Life* and *29* are scheduled to be adapted into feature films! Have you been involved with the screenplays? What is the most exciting (or nerve-wracking!) part about this process of turning your novel into a movie?

Honestly, I have been nothing less than ecstatic about the process of my books being adapted into movies. As I am writing this, I know that the screenplay to *The Ten Best Days of my Life* has just been completed. It’s just completed so I haven’t read it yet, but the parts that have been described to me gave me such chills they brought tears to my eyes. A lot of people ask me how I feel giving up my *babies*. I think that’s a strange question. I don’t feel that I gave up my babies. Yes, I created these characters, and they’re a huge part of my life, but coming from a film background, I know it’s virtually impossible to adapt a book exactly as it was written and turn it into a movie. It’s been really exciting for me to give someone else the creative freedom to explore my characters and come up with ideas I didn’t think of. The screenplay of *Ten Best Days* has a component to it that I kick myself for not thinking of first. I’ll be very curious to see how much of what I see in my head in terms of what heaven might look like in *Ten Best Days*, or if actresses that I thought of when I was writing *29* will see themselves in the parts.

In a way, I think of optioning my books as though I was renting out an apartment. Once I “rent out” my books, like an apartment, I’m not going to walk in all the time and ask them, “What are you going to do with that wall? I don’t think you should put that picture there, that’s not the way I had it when I was living here.” For now, I put my trust in the screenwriters, producers, actors, etc. The people who are involved in these projects have shown me that they have as much passion for them as I do, and they have valued my opinion the whole way through. I couldn’t have done it if I didn’t see their passion in the first place. For that reason alone, I can’t wait to see how the work will be interpreted.

3. Your previous books have received warm critical praise. Did you find that to be more inspirational or intimidating as you wrote *Pinch Me*?

Any writer who tells you they don’t care what the critics say is probably lying. Obviously, I hope each of my books is well received by the critics. But, the most

important thing to me is satisfying my readers. The main thing I like to explore in all of my books is the idea of telling a love story of an un-sexual nature. By that I mean, if you look at my previous books, *Target Underwear and a Vera Wang Gown* was my own love story about a girl and her closet. *The Ten Best Days of my Life* was a love story between a girl and her parents. *29* was a love story between a family of women: a grandmother, her daughter, granddaughter and best friend. In *Pinch Me*, I wanted to tell a love story about a husband and wife, but I didn't want it to just be about sex and romance. I wanted to explore the idea of soul mates and what that really means. For Lily, it wasn't about claiming her man. Lily would have and did everything she could so Gogo would be happy and safe, even if it meant never seeing him again. That's what we do for the people we love most. From what I gather, that's what people want to see in my books. I have no interest in telling a straightforward boy meets girl love story. There are so many amazing writers who already do that. At this point, readers expect me to turn the notion of romance on its side and really explore what it means to be in love.

4. Although you currently live in Los Angeles, you chose to set *Pinch Me* and your other novels in Philadelphia. Why does that city hold such allure for you? What is your favorite part of Philadelphia?

This summer will mark the 20th anniversary of my move to Los Angeles. I've now lived in Los Angeles longer than in Philly. That's crazy to me, especially since I still have my Philadelphia accent. Philadelphia is where I was born and where I was brought up. The city itself has shaped who I am, just as much as my parents and teachers and childhood friends. There is a bond that we Philadelphians have that can't be broken. We're a club of folks who, no matter how far we stray or how old we get, will never be considered anything else but Philly kids. I love being a part of that club. It's a comforting feeling to know that I will never feel lost in my life because there are people who know me so well and for so long I start to wonder if we came out of the same womb. That's something about Philly that I try to bring out in my books. I am very proud to have been brought up in Philadelphia and to be known forever as a Philly kid. Using that amazing, beautiful city as a backdrop in my books, I guess is my way of saying thank you for letting me be a part of the club.

5. Do you share any characteristics with the main character, Lily? What was your inspiration to create her?

The great dancer, Agnes De Mille, once famously said, "To dance is to be out of yourself. Larger, more beautiful, more powerful... This is power, it is glory on earth and it is yours for the taking." I think the same holds true for writing a character in a book. Yes, Lily is a part of me. All of my main characters are some form of me, as much as I try, I just can't help it. But as Ms. De Mille said, they're on a much grander scale.

The idea for *Lily Burns* came to me as I stood in line at the hot foods bar in Whole Foods one day about two years ago. Five years earlier, I had pretty much frequented that hot foods bar every day of my life from the day it opened some seven years before, to the time I moved into my husband's home across town. That particular day I happened to be in my old neighborhood and stopped in for a quick bite to eat. As I was standing there filling up my little cardboard container with whatever was there, I suddenly had this bizarre thought: What if I walked outside and my old crappy car from five years ago with the leaking transmission and dented bumper was parked in the spot where I had just left my brand new sparkling gorgeous car? What if everything that had happened to me in the past five years -- meeting my husband, marrying him, moving in with him, etc. -- never happened and I suddenly woke up from a dream? What if I was still living in my dingy single apartment with that freezer contained in a block of ice? What if all those idiot guys I dated (well, not all of them, but you know who you are) were still in my life? I really freaked myself out. Then I started to think, "What would have happened to my husband? Who would my husband be? What would have become of him in those five years? Who would I be? Those guys I dated who weren't so nice to me, what have I learned since then that I could have told them now?"

6. Each of your novels features strong elements of magic or the fantastic. How does that help you develop your stories?

I usually start with a question that contains some form of fantasy and go from there. In my worst days of being single, it got to the point where I really had to start to ask myself if there was a curse on me when it came to dating. That question has always stuck in my mind when single girlfriends say the same thing to me about themselves. As I was thinking about the idea for the book, I thought about exploring that idea. What if there had been a curse? What would I have done? That's usually how it goes for me. I could tell a story about a woman who has bad luck with men, but to me it seems much more fun if there's a concrete reason why.

In terms of *Lily Burns*, I actually went through a couple of drafts where the curse wasn't there. Gogo pinched her and then he just vanished and she was back in her old single life. I really wanted to tell the old fashioned love story of girl meets boy/ girl loses boy/ girl gets boy back in the end, but every time I tried, *Lily* just seemed pathetic. Then one day I was watching *The Graduate*, one of my all time favorite movies. If you really think about Dustin Hoffman (Benjamin Braddock) in that movie, it's kind of creepy the way he goes up to Berkeley and follows Katherine Ross (Elaine Robinson). Then I saw a movie with Sandra Bullock called *All About Steve*. Both movies have that element of chasing their love, but one really, really works and the other just doesn't cut it (even though I love Sandra Bullock and in my opinion, that woman can seriously do no wrong). What I discovered was that I was writing a girl meets boy story and not the other way around and sadly, there's a

big difference in that. If a girl chases a boy, it's really difficult not to make her seem like a stalker to the reader, even if, as in *Pinch Me*, she was married to the guy in a previous form of life or whatever you want to call it. It sucks, but that's the world we live in.

So I put it in another world.

I thought, what if there was something beyond her control that prevented her from getting the guy she loved? That's when I thought of the curse and I got really excited and it all came together after that. If I couldn't use that element of fantasy, it just wouldn't have worked for me.

7. Your memoir was based on your series of essays for *Marie Claire*. Do you also incorporate any elements of those essays into your fiction?

Yes, I would say that I incorporate elements of my *Marie Claire* essays into my fiction, but throughout my books, I've created kind of a chain from that, based on what readers have told me they've enjoyed reading about. The *Marie Claire* essays were the basis for my book *Target Underwear and a Vera Wang Gown*. This was about my love for clothing and how it has affected my life. I carried my love of clothing to Alex in *The Ten Best Days of my Life* and to Ellie Jerome in *29*. They were both passionate about clothing and how it spoke to them. In *29*, Ellie Jerome was 75-years old and Barbara was 55. So many kind people wrote to say how much they loved hearing the voice of people of that age so I created Dolly and Selma Burns in *Pinch Me*. In my next book, I'll probably incorporate something from *Pinch Me*. I know what it is, but I won't give it away yet.

8. In your author Q&A for *29* you explain that you are very influenced by films, especially the dialogue. You also have a master's degree in screenwriting. What is your all-time favorite movie?

My all time favorite movie is a lovely, touching and still really funny movie from 1940 called *Christmas in July*, which was written and directed by Preston Sturges (who, next to my husband, is my favorite screenwriter of all time). I can still remember seeing it for the first time as a teenager when it came on television at the Jersey Shore in Margate after a hot day at the beach. Dick Powell plays a lowly office worker who dreams of winning a big fortune one day so he can marry his girlfriend. His co-workers decide to send him a phony telegram telling him he's won the latest contest he's entered. I don't want to tell you what happens next because I don't want to spoil it for you, but it's so hilarious and earnest at the same time that I have no idea why this movie hasn't garnered the classic film status like *It's a Wonderful Life* has. This film has definitely influenced my work in terms of writing something that can be funny but heartwarming at the same time. I

can only watch it once a year because I don't want to get sick of it, and when I do, it's always with someone who hasn't seen it before so I can see it through their eyes. It never fails to delight. I know it's on DVD, so if you see it, let me know what you think.

9. What message do you hope readers will take from *Pinch Me*?

Like I said earlier, I was single for a really long time. I never thought I would find him. Believe me, I looked everywhere. Now that I have found him, I don't even care that it took so long. It was worth every minute of waiting. I want people to know that if you are single, no matter how old you are, and you think all the good ones are taken, trust me, your soul mate is out there. You might even start to think that you've got a curse on you, but I'm telling you: you don't. He/She is out there for you. Plain and simple.

10. Are you working on a new novel? Will any of the characters in *Pinch Me* appear in your upcoming work?

Did you catch the cameo made by Barbara and Larry Sustamorn from 29 in the very beginning of *Pinch Me*? I thought it was fun to bring them in. I thought a nice trip to Paris was just what Barbara would have needed after everything she went through.

I am working on something new right now, but I never like to jinx it and say what it's about. So far, none of the characters from *Pinch Me* have popped up, but it's not to say they won't. It's fun for me to add a brief appearance from a character from a previous book just to see what they're up to. I miss them when I'm not with them on a day-to-day basis anymore. Sometimes I think about what it would be like if I could have them all over to my house for dinner. I think about what I would serve and where everyone would sit and if they would get along. Who knows... maybe that's a book somewhere down the line.