

Haunted by the death of her husband and the unresolved problems of their marriage, Ellie Jerome makes a wish on her 75th birthday to be 29 again, just for one day. When she wakes up the next morning and finds that her wish has come true, it turns her whole world upside down. She sets out to have a day without responsibilities or worries in the company of her 25-year-old granddaughter Lucy, never imagining the consequences of her wish.

When Ellie's daughter Barbara and best friend Frida find that she has disappeared without explanation, they form an unlikely team determined to find out what is going on. Over the course of one unusual day, the women each come to terms with what it means to be family, and discover that it is never too late to start your life over.

A CONVERSATION WITH ADENA HALPERN

1. What inspired you to write *29*?

I am fascinated by Ellie's generation of women. They are the women of my mother's generation who came of age in the 1950s. If they weren't married by 22, they were considered old maids and they had three choices for an occupation: teacher, nurse or secretary. As they tell me, "we listened to our mothers and we respected their choices for us." To me, these women led such glamorous lives. Most of them didn't work, they drove fancy cars and they got their hair done, a lot. This was who I wanted to be when I grew up. It took growing up, however, to realize that what seemed so idyllic on the outside was not always so rosy. Sure, some of them enjoy their lives, but as I found out, a lot of them have unfulfilled dreams that leave them with regrets. These are the women who missed out by one generation all the fruits of the women's lib movement. It was their story I wanted to tell. What would you do if you could live for one day and be able to live those dreams? Would you do it?

2. The idea of going back (or forward) in our lives is a popular theme for Hollywood (*Big*, *13 Going on 30*, *Freaky Friday*, *Vice Versa*, etc.). Did any of these films influence the development of the novel?

Funny enough, no. "Roman Holiday" was the movie that influenced me most. Much like Audrey Hepburn's character, Ellie gets this chance to take a day out of life that's unlike any other. She falls in love. She does things she could never do in her situation, but in the end, she knows that she must go back to her life. Like Hepburn's character, it takes Ellie that day to realize it. Using the ability to be young for one day was the best device I could think of for Ellie to truly be able to have a day that would be unlike any other.

One more movie that influenced me was Neil Simon's "The Out of Towners." Barbara and Ellie are like Jack Lemmon and Sandy Dennis in that movie. They can't catch a break. They can't get anything to eat. Everything that could go wrong for them goes wrong. You feel as exhausted and relieved as they look at the end of the movie when Lemmon and Dennis finally get into their hotel room. That's what I wanted it to feel like when Barbara and Frida finally got into Ellie's apartment.

3. How long did **29** take to write? Do you schedule time for writing, or work when inspiration strikes? Tell us a little bit about your writing process.

With interviewing various women and getting the story straight, the whole book took me about a year to write. Before I start writing a book there are two things I always do. First, I write the first 50-75 pages. That's how I develop the voice of the character. Within these 50-75 pages, I might include characters or lines or themes that I didn't think of when I conceived of the idea. This leads me to the next step: writing the outline. I hate writing outlines, but they really are the most important step in writing a book. The outline is my blueprint. I look at it constantly to see where I am in the overall story. The thing I love most about writing a book, as compared with say, writing a screenplay, is that screenplays are very structured. Books are structured of course, but to a point. You're able to go off the beaten track and expand on an idea. This can take days and then you forget what happens next in the story. That's why you really need the outline to see where you're going.

As for the actual writing of the book, that's the best part. When I'm writing a book, that's pretty much all I think about. I work five days a week like a normal job, but I also work when the inspiration strikes. When this happens, I'll jot little notes, a line or sometimes a paragraph on scrap paper when the moment hits. Funny story. I was at the market and I was thinking about the chapter "I Don't Kiss and Tell." I wrote the sentence where Ellie says to Zachary, "I regret my life," on the top of the shopping list so I would remember it. Later that day, my husband came to me looking concerned. He said to me, "is everything okay?" I asked him why? He pulled out the shopping list and pointed to that sentence I had written and said, "Because I found this in the kitchen." We had a laugh about it. Also, I came up with the last paragraph of **29 while I was at the gas station filling up my tank. I wrote the whole thing on the back of a bunch of old receipts. It was kind of hard to decipher what I wrote once I got home, but I got the gist of it.**

4. In the acknowledgements, you thank all the women you interviewed. What was the most surprising thing you learned from them?

The most surprising thing I learned about the women I interviewed was just how honest they were. All I did was ask them this one question, "What would you do if you could be 29 for a day?" These women answered me so truthfully that it was almost uncomfortable. The look in their eyes when I asked them this question, like somehow I could grant them this wish. I thought I'd get jokey answers. I thought I'd really have to pry and sometimes I did, but for the most part, they just told me what they would have done.

5. **29** hinges on Ellie's regrets about the way she lived her life. Have regrets been a force in your own life?

I regret 90% of anything I say in a given day. I regret that I just admitted that. I know it's the main reason I'm a writer. It's why I love what I do for a living. If I could type out everything I ever said, I'd never stop pressing the delete button. This is the neurotic in me speaking of course. The other part of me knows that I should only regret maybe 20% of what I say on a given day. Who cares what people think? I'm like Barbara in that way. I'll wake up in the middle of the night regretting something I've said. A part of me knows that the person probably wasn't offended by it, but still. The late actress Kitty Carlisle used to look at herself in the mirror each morning and say, "I forgive you for whatever you did yesterday." I do this a lot. It always seems to make me feel a little better.

Another thing I regret, or wonder is if I'm having enough fun in my life. Have I experienced everything I wanted to experience at my age? Have I seen everything I should have seen? You know that question, "If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say to you when you arrive at the pearly gates?" I want him to say, "*Now, that was living!*" I don't think he'll say that though. I think he'll say, "*You didn't go out enough.*" I don't attend enough parties. I often wish I were a Washington socialite. They seem to go to a lot of balls. I'm never in a situation where I'm required to wear a ball gown. This is a huge regret in my life.

6. Throughout the book, you alternate viewpoints between Ellie, Barbara, and Frida. Which of these women was the most difficult to write? Which was the most fun? Who are you most like?

Ellie, Barbara and Frida were a total blast to write, but I would have to say that Ellie was the most fun and the most difficult. Ellie is every one of my mother's friends' voices. I know that voice very, very well. I've been hearing it my entire life. That voice is very direct. When they tell a story, it always goes off the beaten track. There's always some advice for you in the end.

The part that was difficult was making sure that Ellie was the 75-year-old woman of today. People still think of the 75-year-old woman as the kind who sits on a rocking chair on the front porch. I'm sure that person still exists; it's just not any 75-year-

old woman that I know. Sophia Loren is 75. Julie Andrews is 74. Carol Burnett is 76. You wouldn't find any of these women wearing galoshes and granny glasses, would you? It was very important to me that I got this right and it was difficult not to stereotype that "granny" 75-year-old. I wanted to create a character who 75-year-old women, or their daughters and granddaughters could look at and say, "she's just like my (fill in the blank)."

That's where Frida came in. Frida is that stereotypical 75-year-old woman. She couldn't stay that way though and I had to figure out why she was that way. I realized it was because she thought that was the only way a woman of her age could live. It took that day for her to realize that wasn't the case.

7. Ellie Jerome is the one character you don't use to narrate the story. Why not?

This is Ellie's story. Ellie needed to figure out her problems in her own voice. To hear Ellie speak to the reader from the heart is to know exactly who this woman is. Also, it was Ellie's day and I wanted to experience that day through Ellie's voice.

Barbara and Frida are secondary. They are not the focus of the story. To let them speak in their own voices would have made it their stories too. I didn't want to do that. I wanted this book to be about a woman who has spent her life wondering what could have been. When Ellie finds her answer, it directly addresses the problems Barbara and Frida have in their own lives.

8. The city of Philadelphia becomes a character in its own right. What about Philly drew you to choose it as the setting?

I've lived in Los Angeles for the past 18 years, but Philadelphia is my home. (I sound like an advertisement) Sometimes it's easier to stand back (like 3,000 miles away) to see where you really came from. It took moving away all those years ago to be able to see how beautiful my city really is, both scenically and its people. Even though Philadelphia is a large city, it still feels like a small town. I could come back to Philly and run into an old friend walking down the street and the conversation could pick up where we left off years before. Philadelphia is like the Cheers Bar. Everyone knows your name or your brother's name or your cousin. That's a club I'm proud to be a part of. Ellie is a part of that environment. Ellie's roots are there. Like me, the generations of Ellie's family are what makes Philadelphia the city that it is. To me, that's its history. I couldn't place her anywhere else because Ellie was exactly the type of woman I knew and admired when I was growing up.

9. The difficult dynamics of Ellie's family life are key to the development of the novel, and are arguably universal issues for women – the mother-daughter relationship is notoriously difficult. Are the characters informed by your own personal experiences, or are they inspired by a more general view of this dynamic in our society?

As a daughter, when you're writing about a mother/daughter relationship, I think it's next to impossible not to bring some of your own baggage into it. I really tried not to. Honestly, this is the first book I've written where you couldn't pick a character and say it was me or someone in my family. You would never look at me and say that I was the model for Barbara. I'm not 55, I'm not overweight, I live 3,000 miles away from my mom and I didn't marry Larry the dentist. Ellie is definitely not my mother. She has never relied on my father like Ellie did with Howard. My mother has always been much more independent than that. In terms of our relationship, my mother and I don't bicker like Ellie and Barbara.

Having said that, like Barbara, there's a part of me that always wants to make my mother proud. I want to win the award for best daughter in the world. This is not something that takes over my life like it does with Barbara. It's just an itch that's always in the back of my head.

So when I was writing the passage where I describe why Barbara is the way she is and that need to make her mother proud, I didn't set out to bring this aspect of my personality into it. It was only when I read it over that I realized, oh crap, that's me.

I think that feeling is pretty much universal though. I can't imagine I'm the only daughter who wants to make her mother proud. Therefore, I'm going to chalk that up to a universal theme... and maybe ask some girlfriends of mine if they have that same issue.

10. Who are your influences as a writer?

I'm a voracious reader, but truthfully, I'm influenced more by movies than I am by books. My style of writing is less descriptive and more expressive. I'm not one to go on about what a room looks like. I find that boring. I like to hear what the character says, their tone, their voice and I like to see what's going on in their head, what's behind their words.

I got my bachelor's degree, as well as my master's degree in screenwriting so a lot of what I write seems more cinematic. I get that a lot and I know it's because of my training. When I'm writing a book, for me, it's like watching a movie play out in my head. Writing a screenplay, however, and watching a movie are two very different things. Writing a screenplay has to be very structured. It has to have three acts on three particular page numbers. The major dramatic question of the movie has to carry you from scene to scene, even though it doesn't seem that way when you're watching it. That's why I prefer writing books to movies. I hear the

conversations between the characters and I write them down. I don't have to worry specifically about what page I'm on. That is so freeing, especially when you've been trained to write screenplays. The best thing I ever did was learn how to write screenplays so I could write books. Don't get me wrong; writing a book is really, really hard. I like how the comic Lewis Black put it once: "Writing a book is like having homework that never stops." Once you're able to free yourself from the firm structure of writing a screenplay though, it can feel a chef who learns how to make a soufflé with one arm tied behind his back. It's not any better, but it can definitely feel more liberating.

Woody Allen, Billy Wilder, Neil Simon, Larry Gelbart and Carrie Fisher have all influenced my work in one way or another. The film "It's a Wonderful Life" influenced my previous book, "The Ten Best Days of my Life". Preston Sturges, however, is probably the biggest influence on my work. Look at movies like "Miracle at Morgan's Creek," or "Christmas in July." Those movies are over 50 years old, but they still stand up. The movies flow so easily because the dialogue is quick and precise. You really listen to the dialogue for fear you might miss something. Actually, I just remembered this. Barbara's last name, Sustamorn, was influenced by the names of Sturges' characters. His characters have such amazing names like Trudy Kockenlocker. There are three characters in "Christmas in July" whose names are Tom, Dick and Harry. That's genius. Barbara and her husband Larry seem like such pathetic characters on the outside that I thought it would be great to make them even more pathetic by giving them a name that sounded like "such a moron."

11. What books were on your bedside table when you were writing?

I'm pretty sure I was reading Curtis Sittenfeld's book, "American Wife," but I don't know that it influenced me when I was writing the book. It should have, because not only was I reading about a first lady, but the presidential election was going on. I don't think any of that shows up in 29 though. Does it? Let me know.

12. Are you working on any new projects that you can tell us about?

It's always tough to describe what I'm writing. The most difficult question anyone can ask me is, "what's your book about?" I always tend to give them a one sentence log line, but then I always end that sentence with, "but it's about more than that."

So what am I writing now?

The book I'm writing now is a love story... but it's about more than that.

Questions & Topics for Discussion:

1. Inspired by the number of candles on her birthday cake, Ellie wishes to be 29 again for a day. What age would you choose to return to, and why?
2. Ellie believes that if she can have just one day of her youth back, she can erase her regrets. Do you think it's possible to make up for such regrets in a day? Do you think Ellie really believes this?
3. Barbara and Frida spend a disastrous day wandering around Philadelphia, trying to find the missing Ellie. When they are reunited with Ellie and Lucy, Lucy tells them that they need to get their own lives. Is it as simple as that? In what ways has Ellie encouraged their dependency on her?
4. Which of the three women do you believe has the biggest changes to make: Barbara, giving up her quest for Ellie's approval; Ellie, learning to treat Barbara like an adult and not a child; or Frida, learning to assert herself?
5. Lucy is thrilled at the chance to spend a day with her newly-young grandmother. Think about your own grandmother—can you imagine doing the same with her? What do you think would have been on her “to do” list?
6. Ellie writes off many of her regrets by saying that was just what you did in her day. Is this an accurate portrayal of her generation, or is she dodging responsibility for her actions?
7. Frida and Ellie have very different outlooks on life and aging. Ellie wants to go back and redo her youth, while Frida believes that “what's done is done” (p 193). Have their different marriages influenced their outlooks, or is it a difference in personality? Which do you agree with?
8. Thinking about her marriage to Howard, Ellie ponders which is better: to marry for love or security. Is this question a product of her upbringing in the '50s, or is it still relevant for women today?
9. Ellie cares greatly about presentation and image, and has had some cosmetic surgery done. What are your feelings on plastic/cosmetic surgery? Do you plan to take advantage of such procedures as you age?
10. As Ellie's day comes to a close, she fantasizes about staying young and running away with Zachary, but in the end she chooses her old life. Did she make the right decision? What would you have done in her place?

11. After finding the cards and notes that Howard saved over the years, Ellie comes to the conclusion that he was her soul-mate, despite all his flaws. Is she just resigning herself to the reality of the past, or is the proof of his love for her really enough to make up for his affairs?

12. Ellie notes that being 75 gets her special treatment, and that this makes her feel old. Is this truly a bad thing? How does our society treat the elderly, and what needs to change?

Tips to Enhance Your Book Club:

29 is set in Philadelphia, and features many of the city's major attractions, from cheesesteaks to the Liberty Bell. Ask one or two members of the group to do a little research and present what they find most interesting about Philadelphia to the rest of the group. Other members could bring in food, drinks, or snacks inspired by the city.

The photo of Lucy and Ellie at 25 and 29 becomes very important to Ellie, once she returns to her 75-year-old self. Have each member of the book club bring in a picture of themselves at their favorite age, and discuss what they liked best about that time in their lives.

Ellie is thrilled to be able to wear the dress that Lucy designed in her honor. Ask members to design/describe/find a picture of their own "perfect" dress!

Many movies have been made exploring the theme of going back (or forward) in age – *Big*, *13 Going on 30*, *Freaky Friday*, *Vice Versa*, etc. Have a movie marathon of your favorites after discussing the book.