

KRISTAN HIGGINS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A
NOVEL



life
and other
inconveniences



— BOOK CLUB KIT —

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Genevieve copes—and teaches her family to cope—by soldiering on despite life’s difficulties. Do you think this helps or hurts her family? In what way?
2. Genevieve’s treatment of her two sons goes from one extreme to the other. Do you think parents sometimes favor one child over another? Are we blind to our own children’s faults? Are we blind to our faults as parents?
3. Why do you think Genevieve has so many dogs?
4. In what ways are Genevieve and Emma similar?
5. How do you think the tragedies and hardships that Emma faces shape her as a person? What about as a parent? How do they shape her for the better?
6. Why do you think Emma agrees to go back to New England when her grandmother asks her? Is it really just for Riley’s sake?
7. How does Riley bring Genevieve and Emma together?
8. How are Paul, Emma’s grandfather, and Genevieve able to get over their differences?
9. Parenting is a major theme in the book, especially when it comes to the role of the father: Clark as a father to Emma, Garrison as a father to Clark, and Miller as a father to Tess. How do their experiences affect their parenting of their children?
10. Choice is another major theme in the book: Emma’s choices to keep Riley; to move in with her maternal grandfather; and to allow Genevieve to meet Riley. How do Emma’s choices shape her life? Do you disagree with any of the choices she makes?
11. Why do you think Riley is able to connect with Genevieve in a way that Emma can’t?
12. Emma says, “Life tooketh with one hand and gaveth with the other.” Several of the characters either go through tragedies or make choices that alter the course of their lives. In what ways does life work out anyway? How do you think their lives would have been different if these events had not occurred?
13. How does Genevieve show that she truly does care for Emma? In what ways does Emma show she truly cares for Genevieve? How do you think they could have shown it better to each other?
14. What do you think makes it possible for Emma to be by Genevieve’s side when she dies?
15. Four generations of women are featured in the book: Genevieve, April, Emma and Riley. In what ways are they similar as mothers and as daughters? Why do you think the author chose to create this family dynamic? How does the author use the characters to display the nuances of motherhood and childhood?



A conversation with author **KRISTAN HIGGINS**

How would you describe *Life and Other Inconveniences*?

This is the story of three generations of the London family when they come together one summer—Genevieve, the regal, terrifying matriarch, so convinced of her moral superiority, so broken from a long-ago loss; her adult granddaughter, Emma, who had to forge a life on her own after getting pregnant in high school; and Emma’s sixteen-year-old daughter, Riley, who is the key to bringing these estranged women together. It’s a story about how we value life and deal with loss, how we rebuild ourselves, how we connect, even when we thought connecting was the last thing we’d do. And, of course, it’s about learning to love again, whether it’s a romantic relationship after years of disappointment and grief, or having a second chance at loving a child.

Your last novel focused on bias related to weight and body image, particularly for women. With *Life and Other Inconveniences*, you explore a different area of body perception through Genevieve as an aging woman. Do you feel these two issues are similar for women? How are they different?

Women have it rough when it comes to being judged or seen or not seen in our society. Recently, Gillette put out a commercial asking men to push back against toxic masculinity, and there was an uproar from a hopefully small group . . . How dare you tell us men to be decent??? I actually laughed out loud, because women are told how to be all the time. *Smile. Be thinner. Be smoother. Be nicer. Be smarter than everyone, but dress in the way I want you to. Age, but gracefully. Don’t have plastic surgery, but don’t you dare look old! Or have plastic surgery . . . just not so I can tell. Have curves. Be fit. Don’t eat that. Eat more.* It’s exhausting and ridiculous, and *Good Luck with That* got down and dirty

with that subject. Georgia and Marley finally overcame those toxic messages and learned to be happy exactly where they were, how they were, as they were. I think it’s a message every woman (and man) needs to hear.

In my newest book, Genevieve talks about the abrupt invisibility that comes with aging. She comes from a place of great privilege—white, wealthy, educated, attractive, successful—and she never expects that suddenly she will cease to matter in the way she once did. How infuriating for a woman who has overcome and created so much to fade into the background simply because she’s no longer young? I’ve listened to my older friends discuss this, and now, at the age of fifty-four, I know what they’re talking about.

Aging and body image are both issues that have more impact—usually a more negative impact—on women than men. It shouldn’t be true, but it is. Hopefully, we’re headed in a different direction with that.

In both this book and your last novel, *Good Luck with That*, you tackle themes that are particularly challenging for women. Is it difficult for you to delve into painful topics in your writing?

Oddly, no. I mean, I sob over my books. I bleed into the pages. But that’s what it means to be human, isn’t it? To incorporate joy with loss, to address wounds so they can heal. As a reader, I want to be taken on a deeply emotional ride, so as a writer, it feels natural, cleansing and healing somehow. No one has gotten through life unscathed, and to write pure fluff just doesn’t feel honest.

Despite exploring some somber topics, you always find the humor in everyday life and its complexities. How do

you find the balance when handling serious themes but ultimately leading readers to an inspiring message?

It's the way I think life should be lived. Balance. Acknowledging the sad, difficult aspects, but not letting them define you. Finding joy in little things. Being able to laugh at yourself and with your friends, especially when times are tough.

Are there aspects of any of the characters in *Life and Other Inconveniences* that you drew from yourself?

Well, I don't have a fabulously wealthy grandmother, and I wasn't a teen mother. But the author's job is to tap into her own experiences and translate them into a fictional character's life. We've all known fear, elation, love, loneliness, satisfaction. When Genevieve muses about the indignities of aging, or when Emma talks about the slow erosion of love between her and her daughter's father . . . those are things I can relate to, even if I haven't lived their exact experiences.

I don't think books should always be autobiographical, because the scope would be so narrow if we only wrote about what happened to us.

That being said, I did have a grandmother who disapproved of me. She was the type of mother who worshipped her only child (my dad) and, for some reason, took an immediate dislike to me. I remember the shock of not being loved . . . When you're a kid, you expect your grandparents to love you, and she was often cold or critical where I was concerned.

And like any good writer, I had my heart broken, slowly and bit by bloody bit. He wasn't a bad person, but that feeling of watching as someone loves you less and less . . . it's wrenching. You feel so helpless, knowing what the inevitable outcome is, wanting to go back to the way things were, unsure what the future will be like without this person. And yet somehow, these experiences almost always make us better and tougher and smarter, and maybe a little more forgiving.

You often populate your books with large casts of characters, including family and friends. Your characters, for good and bad, are part of a community. Does that come from your own experiences? Why is it an important element in the stories you tell?

I live in my hometown. I'm still called "Noel's girl" or "Declan's mom." I run into people who knew me as a kid. Every time I vote, I chat with Mrs. Pederson, whose daughter used to babysit my siblings and me, or the Wilkinsons, whose kids I babysat, who are parents themselves now. Community is what I know. Part of that is the discomfort of being known too well, of being remembered as the girl who didn't have friends in middle school, or the one who was completely unremarkable academically in high school.

Community is important in my books because no one lives in isolation (no matter how tempting that might sound sometimes). We are all pebbles thrown into the same pond, and the ripples crash into other ripples. It's what makes life interesting.

Familial discord is something that most experience at some point in their lives and can often come down to communication. Why do you feel that it was easier for Genevieve to open up to Emma's teenage daughter, Riley, when she continually failed to build connections with Emma?

Genevieve took Emma in when Emma's mother died, and she wasn't a hundred percent gracious about it. They have a loaded history. Riley, though, is a blank slate, and more innocent and welcoming than Emma, who is rightfully wary of the grandmother who kicked her to the curb all those years ago. I've often witnessed (and lived) the bond that skips a generation. It's easy to categorize someone you think you know well; but when there's some space between the years, a different kind of closeness can grow. I was so close with my maternal grandmother and knew things about her my own mom had never heard. I think it was

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because I asked, whereas my mom assumed she knew. I've seen that same dynamic play out with my own kids and their grandmothers, and it's charming and special. The older person gets to be new again, telling their stories to someone who's eager to hear them, who doesn't bring the same baggage to the table.

Emma's role in her family is complicated. She is not yet the oldest member, yet she is called on to help care for her grandmother while still raising her teenage daughter. Do you have any experience with being a part of the "sandwich generation"?

I do, but in an odd way. My grandparents were extraordinarily young when I was born, still in their early forties. They were more like a second set of parents. As they got old and needed care, I was in a unique position to help them, and sometimes act as a negotiator between them and their own children. I would often take my little kids and stay with my grandparents, cook them dinner, put my kids to bed, then keep my grandparents company. It was lovely. I wouldn't trade it for the world.

With my own mom, yes, I'm in the sandwich again, though my kids are nearly grown. I look after my mom when she's sick, do the occasional hard or dirty work of shoveling snow or changing a dressing. But she's still young enough to look after me every once in a while, too. I remember when I broke my leg a few years ago, and my husband and kids had to go to a family thing in another state. My mom came over and had to help me into bed. It was the first time she'd tucked me in in decades, and I won't lie—it was kind of great.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

That it ain't over till it's over. We all have second, third, and tenth chances to get things right. That love can come from the most unexpected places, and life can be so breathtakingly beautiful, even if it's not the life you once imagined.

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BOOK CLUB KIT ACTIVITY

**WRITE ABOUT OR DISCUSS A
TIME WHEN YOU ENCOUNTERED
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BUT TURNED OUT TO BE A
DEFINING MOMENT IN YOUR LIFE.**