

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. Hendrik opens his diary with “the decision to give the world a little taste of the real Hendrik Groen.” He says he has always been a people-pleaser, always avoided confrontation, but now he’s going to shock everyone with “an uncensored exposé.” Do you think the incorrigible, irreverent character we come to know over the course of the diary is the “real” Hendrik? How would you characterize who he really is, and does that differ from the character he is presenting to us? How do you think he changes over the course of the story?
2. Hendrik’s friend Evert believes that “the only point of being alive is to kill time as pleasantly as possible.” Do you agree? What would you say it means to really “live”? Does this change as we age?
3. Hendrik and Evert are best friends but very different as individuals. Why do you think they have such a strong bond? What does the novel have to teach us about friendship, particularly between two men late in life?
4. Discuss the development of the relationship between Hendrik and Eefje. Does it turn out the way you expected? Why or why not? What do you think they see in one another that gives them this special connection?
5. Over the course of the year, Hendrik will form close friendships with the other members of the Old But Not Dead Club. How does each of these new friends shape or change Hendrik, for better or worse? Are there particular friends in your life who have changed you?
6. If you had to plan a trip for the Old But Not Dead Club, where would you go and what would you do there?
7. Hendrik describes old age as following “the same trajectory as a baby developing into an adult, only the other way ’round.” Do you think he’s right?
8. Hendrik has sworn to never let himself be turned into a dull, hopeless old person, but he can’t nail down a specific obstacle or infirmity that would, for him, be a final tipping point. He describes this as like being a “frog in a pot of water,” a situation in which each new indignity seems unacceptable until it arrives, at which point he decides he can cope until the next one. Why do you think he keeps moving the goalpost? Where would you draw the line for yourself? Do you see his reluctance as weakness or strength? How does this contrast with Grietje’s assertion that “every fine day is one more day”?
9. In June, Management creates controversy and anger among the residents by announcing that they’ll be installing cameras in the care home’s corridors. Do you

agree or disagree with this decision, and why? For the elderly or for anyone: What is the line between safety and freedom?

10. *The Secret Diary* is full of humorous lines and unexpected physical comedy. Talk about your favorite funny scene from the book.

11. Toward the end of his diary, after a tragedy at the residence, Hendrik writes: “I can’t make the reality prettier than it is: sad, grim and funny all at once.” Most of the time, Hendrik seems to choose to see the “funny” in everything; do you agree with this attitude? Why or why not?

Q & A with Hendrik Groen

Where did the idea for the novel come from? What was the hardest part of writing it, or the easiest?

On the one hand you have the old people who are shuffling toward the inevitable end—sighing, complaining, and submissive. On the other hand you have senior citizens who manage to complete the last stage with dignity, good cheer, and contentment. That mix of sadness, humor, strength, and weakness fascinates me, and that’s what is at the heart of this book.

You write with tremendous tenderness about your characters, even as you highlight the comedy of their personality quirks and situations. Do you have favorite people or scenes in the book? Why do you think the characters act the way they do?

I am polite and friendly myself, cautiously critical and moderately optimistic. A touch unhappy with myself, because I’d really prefer to be more like my friend Evert: stoic, blunt, and a rebel. Eefje, in her own charming way, possesses the same qualities. The thought of her sometimes makes my heart skip a beat. I am equally fond of the rest of the Old But Not Dead Club. They’re not members of the club for nothing. But I also have a soft spot, tempered with exasperation, for the cantankerous Bakker and the conniving Slothouwer sisters.

The book has become a huge worldwide bestseller. Is that connected to your decision to remain anonymous? What has surprised you the most about the book’s reception, or connection to its audiences?

I think the book’s success has to do with two irrefutable realities:

1. Everyone hopes to have a healthy old age.
2. Old age comes with ailments.

Everyone can relate. Even if you don’t identify with it yourself, you’ll recognize your father or mother, grandpa or grandma.

Hopefully, the fact that I prefer to not be in the spotlight has had only a very minor effect on my book’s popularity.

What has moved me most is that many old people have been inspired by my book to not give up on life but to mine even these last years for all they have to offer. Apparently a number of Old But Not Dead clubs have seen the light. Hendrik is proud as punch about that.