
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

secrets to happiness

A NOVEL

SARAH DUNN

A conversation with Sarah Dunn

How was the process of writing Secrets to Happiness different from that of writing your first novel, The Big Love?

Well, it was much more pleasant. That's the main thing. I really enjoyed writing this book, and all of those things happened that novelists always talk about, the characters started talking and taking over the story. I never had the slightest idea how it would end. I keep a big corkboard on the wall in my office, and I was always rearranging the scenes in the first half of the book, moving my three-by-five cards around—a lot of procrastinating, really, involving bright Magic Markers and such—but the entire right side was just empty cork for a very long time.

When I started out, I wanted to write a longer book than *The Big Love*, because everybody was telling me they read my entire book on a single airplane flight, and I was starting to get a little offended. I thought it would be good to write something that took a little longer for people to finish. I think they did something with the font or something, because this one reads just as fast.

What aspects of Holly's character would you say you identify with most—or least?

I love to give advice. I always have. About 80 percent of the advice I give is great, but unfortunately the other 20 percent

is horrible. I mean, ruin-your-life horrible. And I never know which is which, and I argue for both kinds with equal certainty. Like Holly, I do tend to meddle, and I suppose I have a dash of the rigidity that she has. My sister read the book and sent me an e-mail that said, “Who was the twenty-two year old? *Was* there a twenty-two year old?” Sadly, there was not.

Holly has written a book loosely based on her relationship with Spence. As a writer, do you often crib material from your own relationships? Are there characters in Secrets to Happiness who are based on real people?

Let me just say it’s a dangerous thing to be my friend. But some of my friends now *want* to show up in a book, and they like to pick out the little parts that they know are based on them. For example, my friend Jill always insists on sharing a changing room with me. I have no idea why she does this. She has a lot of sisters, I guess. She also encourages/forces me to buy expensive things that I never end up wearing, and so when Jill got to that scene in the book about Amanda, she knew the scene was based on her. I’ve found that it’s easier to base a character on someone you meet for a few minutes at a cocktail party than on someone you’ve known a long time, because then your subconscious just takes those fleeting details and plays with them until the character comes alive.

Chester and Panty are both adorable-sounding dogs. Do you have a dog? Brain tumor-free, I hope...

I don’t have a dog. I have a new baby and a fat, ill-behaved cat, and a dog would probably throw me over the edge. I had a sad experience with a cat around the time I was writing *Secrets to*

Happiness and that influenced the shape of the Chester story. It was one of those things where, as a writer, you use the feelings but not the facts.

Secrets to Happiness is a very “New York” story. Do you think this story could have taken place elsewhere? Is finding happiness in New York City particularly challenging, do you think?

One character in the book, Lonnie, says that New Yorkers suffer from “excessive ego demands,” and I think that’s true. New York City, I contend, actively conspires against happiness. There are a lot of other things you can get easily—stimulation and excitement and a very good bagel come to mind—but ordinary things are hard. Daily life can become a competitive sport. Honestly, just listening to myself, what the heck am I doing here? Maybe it’s time to move!

Holly spends a Sunday afternoon in the Strand bookstore, but she has to set herself some time and money restrictions before she enters. Are books a favorite indulgence for you, too?

I’m in a bookstore, I’d say, four times a week. I love bookstores, although one thing nobody tells you is that publishing a book can ruin bookstores for you for a while. In that entire sea of books, maybe, *maybe* you’ll find one or two copies of something you spent several years of your life creating. Or none! But I consider myself a book buyer, not just a reader, so I’ve had to get over that. My father used to take my sister and me to a bookstore once a week, and we each got to pick out two books. Now, all these years later, I’d say I’m still averaging two new books a week.

You recently had a baby boy. How has that affected your writing life?

Writing used to be the hardest thing I did in a day, but now it's the easiest. I have a nanny most days until 1:30, and let me tell you, sitting in Starbucks for a few hours every morning, thinking your own thoughts, putting them down on paper—suddenly, that's paradise! How is it that I used to complain about this? Then I go home and I'm covered in spit-up for seven hours. Come to think of it, I'm more or less covered in spit-up at Starbucks too, but I really can't blame that on Harry.

What are you working on next?

I'm hard at work on a new novel, with a little bit of Hollywood stuff thrown in so I don't lose my health insurance or end up living in a cardboard box. I will say, there's nothing like writing a novel. It's a pretty satisfying enterprise, over all.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. If you took the title of the novel literally, what “secrets to happiness” would you say the book offers?
2. Holly is still hopelessly in love with Alex, who left her in order to start dating again. Do you think there’s a proper length of time to mourn a lost relationship?
3. What do you think of the character Lucas? Is Holly’s relationship with someone so young inappropriate?
4. Holly’s writing partner, Leonard, has squandered the wealth that came with his success. In what ways does money reign over the characters’ lives in *Secrets to Happiness*? Does it influence the way they act and interact?
5. Jack jokingly asks Holly whether the main character of her book “gets the guy” in the end. How do you think *Secrets to Happiness* might be similar to the book that Holly wrote?
6. Holly is outraged when Jack, a self-proclaimed Buddhist, orders a hamburger. Is her outrage justified? What do you think of Holly’s own struggle with morality?

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7. When Holly adopts a dog with a brain tumor, Amanda accuses her of having a messiah complex. Do you agree? Is it possible that Chester rescues Holly as much as the reverse?
8. Betsy has a job normally held by women much younger than she is. What do you think of her struggle for happiness? Do you think that age barriers can prevent people from being happy, or is happiness always possible?
9. Lonnie is very different from the type of guy Betsy usually chooses, as she freely admits. What makes her finally accept him as a romantic partner? What would you have thought of Lonnie as a potential date?
10. What do you think of the role religion plays in the novel? How does it tie in with happiness?
11. Cathleen and Spence seem like an odd pair. What do you make of their relationship? Is there a logic to his dating her after being with Holly?
12. New York City itself is a character in *Secrets to Happiness*. How do you think the story would have played out in another setting? Are there inherent complications or advantages in life in a city like New York that add to or detract from relationships?
13. Amanda has “no regrets” about her dalliance with Jack. Is her attitude justifiable? Is Holly right to berate her?

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14. At the end of the book, Holly has a new dog and more than a passing interest in Two Feathers. What do you think will happen between Holly and Two Feathers, if anything?

15. In what ways is Holly similar to Emma Woodhouse in Jane Austen's novel *Emma*? Are there other books that *Secrets to Happiness* reminds you of?