

## Reading Group Guide

1. Though it stands alone as its own story, *On the Bright Side* picks up the story and characters Groen first introduced us to in his breakout debut, *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen, Age 83 ¼*. If you read the first book, how did you feel the characters changed since you last saw them? What did this book teach you that the first did not?
2. At one point Hendrik says, “A research study has shown that eighty-year-olds are happier than they were aged forty. Forty is the low point on the happiness scale.” Do you think that eighty-year-olds are happier? Why might forty be the low point on the happiness scale? What would you consider to be the high point on your personal happiness scale?
3. Hendrik and members of the Old But Not Dead Club frequently have to contend with other people in the old-age care facility who prefer everything to stay the same, frozen in time. How do the Club members resist becoming complacent, and what do you think is the most effective method? What do you do to break out of your own routines?
4. Hendrik mentions how there is so much technological progress that the old folks can’t keep up with it all, but at the same time there is still violence in the world just like there always has been. He wonders, “So, on balance, can one really call it progress?” Do you think that there is such a thing as genuine, objective progress? Why or why not? How would you define an ideal of progress in your own world?
5. The Old But Not Dead Club tries to shake things up by going on culinary adventures. If you were put in charge of their next outing, what restaurant would you choose and how do you think the characters from the book would respond to it?
6. Hendrik writes, “Parallel worlds are everywhere, having hardly anything to do with one another. In our care home we find ourselves somewhere on the very outer edge of it all. Until we tumble off.” What are some other parallel worlds? Can these worlds ever cross one another? Discuss, using examples from the book.
7. Some of the members of the Old But Not Dead Club deal with depression. How do the other club members support them? What are some of the techniques they use to pick each other up? Have you ever had to help someone through a tough time? If so, what did you do?
8. Hendrik oftentimes compares the elderly to young children. How are they similar? How are they different? What do you think this says about the process of growing older?

9. Frida stumps Hendrik when she asks what he most likes about himself, until he goes to Evert for help with the answers. What do you like or dislike most about yourself? What makes this a difficult question to answer? Do you think that you are a more accurate judge of other people or of yourself? Do you see yourself the way others see you?
10. Hendrik and his friends oftentimes complain about their elderly care facility, but at the same time they remain aware of the downsides of independent living at their age. Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of living in an old-age care home. What do you think is the best option, and why?
11. Evert refuses chemotherapy and radiation treatment for his cancer. Were you surprised by his choice? Do you agree with his decision? Why or why not?
12. In the first diary entry Hendrik focuses on statistics about death. The last entry ends with him saying: “A new year—how you get through it is up to you, Groen; life doesn’t come with training wheels. Get this show on the road. And keep looking on the bright side.” Has Hendrik’s mindset changed over the course of the book, and, if so, how? How does he perceive his future? Has this book changed your own thoughts regarding life and aging?

### **A Conversation with the author about *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen***

**Where did the idea for *The Secret Diary* come from? What was the hardest part of writing it? 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? 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 its connection to its audiences?**

I think the book's success has to do with two irrefutable realities: First, everyone hopes to have a healthy old age. And second, 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.

With warm regards,  
HENDRIK GROEN