

*This Is Your
Life,
Harriet Chance!*

Never Too Late: A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion



Never Too Late

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

For sixty-one years my grandmother was Mrs. Harry C. Hank. She ate what her husband ate, voted how her husband voted, and ultimately learned to want out of life what my grandfather wanted. In that respect, Nanny was very much a woman of her generation.

My grandfather wasn't always an easy guy to get along with. A Lutheran minister and a pillar of the community, his guidance and leadership were often called upon by friends and strangers. To the public eye, he was gregarious and reliable. But privately, Pop was unyielding in his convictions, ironclad in his routines, stubborn in his negotiations, and generous and dependable on his own terms. He was, as the saying goes, a good provider. So good that my grandmother was afforded little opportunity to exercise her own agency, pursue her own

interests, or provide for her own needs. Like so many women of her generation, Nanny spent her life in service to her family.

When Pop Hank died in 1994, I think we all assumed that without his needs to absorb Nanny's energies, and his demands to fill her time, she would be lost, bereft of occupation and purpose. What would she do with her days? How would she fill them? Who would she talk to?

My mom and my grandma had a complex relationship, probably because they were so much alike. It was often as if they were out of patience with each other before they'd ever begun. It didn't seem to matter how firmly they resolved themselves to diplomacy or civil obligation—after the briefest of exchanges, they often devolved into a prickly state of nervous exhaustion.

Following Pop's funeral, my mom stayed in Palm Springs to help get her mother's affairs in order. Mostly, I imagined, to rumble through her house like a tornado, emptying drawers, gutting closets, and encouraging my grandmother to dispose of truckloads of junk that had been accumulating since the Truman administration. Patent leather wallets from Turkey, dusty encyclopedia sets from 1953, marmalade jelly packets filched from Knott's Berry Farm in 1967, along with a lifetime of photographs, keepsakes, and letters.

Knowing that my mom could be a little bullish and un-sentimental in her approach to cleaning house, especially on the heels of a tragedy (something my family is accustomed to), I, at that time a thrice-unpublished novelist, drove down from Los Angeles to make sure my mom and my grandma weren't

at each other's throats. I expected that after two weeks holed up together, they would welcome me as a sort of arbiter, a mediating party to help settle what was sure to be a series of disputes and a litany of disagreements. I figured when I wasn't ironing out discord, diverting squabbles, and generally saving the day with my male presence, I could score a few free meals and maybe a Turkish wallet. Heck, maybe even a little cash to put in it.

What I found in Palm Springs was two women I hardly recognized, two women who seemed to have reinvented their entire context with regard to one another. Something, I can't say what, had been healed. I honestly don't know what those two weeks holed up together looked or sounded like to my mom and my grandma. I don't know what they discussed, what they reconciled, or how they managed their armistice so quickly and effectively. All I know is they had improved themselves and their situation decisively, an accomplishment that in large part informed my new novel's seventy-eight-year-old protagonist, Harriet Chance, who finds herself navigating the choppy waters of a tempestuous relationship with her daughter, Caroline.

In the months that followed my visit to Palm Springs, Nanny blossomed. She became more active in her community, acquainted herself with neighbors long unfamiliar, and started attending a more liberal and progressive church. Her political ideologies became increasingly informed, humane, and, most important, her own. Out from under the shadow of her husband at last, Nanny filled her days just fine, thank you very

much. She was bereft of neither occupation nor purpose. It was as if she was finally being who she'd wanted to be all along.

As for my mom, she's now Harriet's age, and though she loves her routines, to be sure, she continually embraces new ideas, new attitudes, new experiences, and to some extent even new technologies (though she's not quite sold on e-mail yet). At eighty, my mom is still expanding, still pushing herself, still learning.

Me, I'm trying, too. If my first novel, *All About Lulu*, was a coming-of-age, I guess you could say *This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance!* is a coming-of-old-age story. Like the bildungsroman, the novel is chiefly concerned with character transformation, though in the case of Harriet Chance, that transformation transcends youth and young adulthood, and even middle age, to encompass the final chapter of a long life. Because as Harriet learns, it's never too late for forgiveness, never too late for acceptance, never too late for growth or reconciliation.

Formally, structurally, and tonally, my novels tend to be quite different from one another on the surface. Yet, I always return to one theme: reinvention. The idea that my characters can improve themselves and their situations is nothing less than an imperative for me as an author and a person. Most of my protagonists have been marginalized by the larger culture in some way. A wimp. A town gone bust. A failed breadwinner and stay-at-home dad. In this regard, Harriet is no exception. Approaching her eightieth birthday, nobody besides the health care industry is marketing toward her, programming toward her, legislating toward her, or even paying attention to where

she's spending her money. Harriet, an everywoman of a certain generation, is now largely ignored by the world. I wanted to change that, at least in some small part.

I was raised by women. While men moved in and out of my life, buying me stuff, flexing their muscles, and announcing themselves loudly before departing, women were always there for me. I originally conceived of this book as a kind of combined portrait of those women, the ones who settled for less, who never quite got their fair share, who soldiered on in the face of inequity, frustration, and even despair. I hope this novel will serve as a thank-you to those women, particularly those like my mom and my grandma who had the courage and wherewithal to continue their personal evolutions late in life, the ones who, like Harriet Chance, confronted their pasts and rewrote the endings that others had already written for their stories.

In the case of Harriet, no sooner does she set sail on an ill-fated cruise of Alaska's Inside Passage than she finds herself disoriented and adrift, forced to navigate the suddenly unfamiliar environs of her own identity. Through a series of revelations, both Harriet and Caroline abruptly discover that much of what they've endured, and much of what they know about themselves and each other, is only a small part of their story. Alone and together, Harriet and Caroline must absorb this new information and begin to heal themselves and their relationship. But don't get the idea it's all misty eyes and aching hearts. Before the journey is over, Harriet's dead husband will make numerous appearances, the ship's steward will be

assaulted with a crab leg, and Harriet will be rolling around on the carpet of the Vista Lounge.

In the end, it is my hope that *This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance!* will stand as an affirmation of the determination, endurance, and power we all have to transform ourselves. It is true that things happen to us that we can never undo. But we can accept them. We can forgive ourselves and others. And ultimately, it's never too late to rewrite our endings.

Questions for Discussion

1. In telling the story of Harriet Chance's life, the author has used a distinctive nonlinear structure. Why do you think the author chose such an unusual way to tell the story? Do you feel that it strengthens the story's impact? Why or why not?
2. In a starred review of *This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance!*, a critic says that "it's not often that a male writer gets inside the head of a female character without botching it somehow," and then adds that in this novel Jonathan Evison succeeds. Do you agree or disagree?
3. In the first draft of his novel, Evison told Harriet's story in a straightforward, third-person omniscient narrative. The second-person you-are-there voice was added during revision.

How did the point of view affect your enjoyment of the novel? Do you think the author made the right choice?

4. Who do you think the voice of the *This Is Your Life* narrative portion of the novel belongs to? What can you point to in support of your conclusion?

5. Harriet Chance seems to have been created as a kind of “everywoman,” reflecting real strength as well as common human foibles. What are some of her strengths, and what are some of her weaknesses? Do you feel that by the end of the novel, she has come to understand some of these aspects of herself?

6. Harriet’s late husband, Bernard, keeps appearing to her throughout the novel. Do you see these appearances as being “real,” or are they figments of Harriet’s imagination? After reading the scenes in which Harriet and Bernard discuss their lives together, did you have a clearer understanding of the dynamic that kept them a couple for so many years? What else did you learn through these scenes?

7. When Caroline joins Harriet on the Alaskan cruise, Harriet is forced to deal with some of the mother-daughter issues that she has avoided for years. Why do you think Harriet was not a more caring mother? Was Caroline culpable as well? What do you feel is the dynamic between the two women by the end of the novel?

8. Memory plays a very large part in Harriet's story. In fact, all of the novel's characters seem to be haunted by memories, some good, others not so good. Do you think that Harriet's memories are a burden to her, or do you think she finds strength in them? What do you think is the significance of Bernard's loss of memory in setting Harriet's adventure in motion?

9. At the end of the novel, Evison writes that "our lives are more sinew than bone" (page 293), meaning that our lives are made up less by the direction we have taken than by the accumulation of memories and associations and yearnings that have held it together. Do you agree? How do you view this in relation to Harriet's life?

10. Why are the past, present, and future important in the telling of Harriet's life story? Can we learn to visualize our own futures by analyzing ourselves in a similar way? Would you be honest with yourself? Or would you bury your secrets? Do you think you have a window to your future the way Harriet does?

11. How do you interpret the end of the novel? Do you see it as the end of Harriet's life, or is it the start of another adventure? Explain your reaction.

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Jonathan Evison is the bestselling author of *West of Here*, *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving* (now a movie titled *The Fundamentals of Caring*), and *All About Lulu*. He lives on the coast of Washington State with his wife and two children. His website is www.jonathanevison.net.