

Our Happy Days

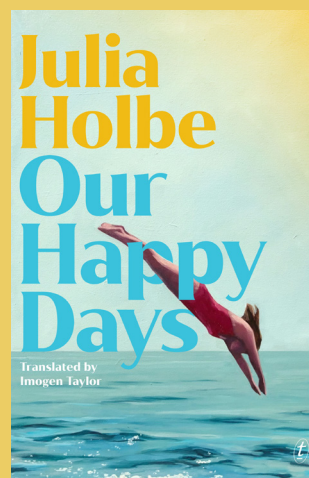
Julia Holbe

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PRAISE FOR *OUR HAPPY DAYS*

'A moving story about the important things in life: friendship, love, forgiveness and the ability to live life to the fullest and seize its opportunities.'

Landlust

'Julia Holbe has written a beautiful, light and yet powerfully evocative book about a bygone happiness.'

Der Spiegel

ABOUT JULIA HOLBE

Julia Holbe was born in 1969 and grew up in Luxembourg. She spent twenty years working as an editor of international literature at the publishing house S. Fischer Verlag. *Our Happy Days* is her first novel.

ABOUT THE BOOK

A vivid tale of love and friendship, coincidence and fate, guilt and betrayal—and the memories of a summer that changed things forever.

Lenica, Marie, Fanny and Elsa spend their summers together on the Atlantic coast in France. The four of them are bound together, their friendship forged in sun-soaked days and wine-filled nights, giddy with happiness and youth.

Decades later, when three of the friends meet again, they realise that their bond has never been broken. Although older, they still carry with them everything that happened years ago—especially the summer that Lenica brought Sean along.

Our Happy Days is a novel about the most important things in life—and reminds us that we only remember the past as we want it to be.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 'This is the story of four young women who invented lives for themselves and became the heroines of those lives. It is the story of a great sorrow and an indestructible friendship. Not least, it is the story of a great, great love.' (p. 1) Discuss this in light of the novel's final scenes.
2. Marie, Fanny and Elsa are all searching for meaning in their lives, and their story is punctuated with older characters who seem to have found it—the old woman from the markets who makes jam; the father-of-the-bride on the wedding barge; Yann—but it always seems to be just out of their grasp. Why do you think this is? Does the story suggest that meaning and understanding are qualities that come from age and experience, or is it something else?
3. Do you see Elsa as a trustworthy narrator? Consider the way her story is filtered through her emotions as you compare her interpretation of the past to the way each of her friends experienced it.
4. Elsa describes the past and present as if 'two timeframes were crashing into each other.' (p. 75) The novel itself seems to take place within this collision, with the narrative slipping easily and often between past and present. How does this shape your relationship with the characters and events of the novel? What does the blurring of time suggest about Elsa's own relationship with her past?
5. Elsa, Marie and Fanny all comment on the ways that aging shocks and surprises them. How do their comments reflect your own experience of aging?
6. 'Our youth hung over the evening like an invisible mist.' (p. 88) Does Elsa ever manage to escape the gauzy trappings of her youth or is she, like Lenica, forever trapped in this mist? Discuss the way that

Holbe balances grief and joy within the theme of youth.

7. The collision between past and present isn't the only one in the novel. What other polarities does Holbe explore, and how do these play out in the lives of the five central characters?
8. What is the meaning of the E. E. Cummings poem that Sean leaves for Elsa? (p. 91) Has he done badly by her, or by the others? How does the novel respond to contemporary expectations of men?
9. 'Life is about love.' (p. 146) Marie argues that love is staying the course, while Elsa thinks that isn't enough. Are any of them satisfied with the ways they have loved or been loved? Whose version of love do you prefer? Do any of them come to a greater understanding of love over the course of the novel?
10. Do you think Elsa would say it was worth it, even though she knew from the start that Sean would break her heart? Is she naïve to have missed his relationships with Lenica and Marie?
11. What is the novel saying about the significance of platonic love? Do you think Elsa would have been able to forgive Lenica if she'd survived?
12. Readers who have read Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* or Emily Bitto's *The Strays* might like to compare these novels with *Our Happy Days*.
13. Is Elsa capable of imagining a life for herself without Sean or Lenica? Do you pity her at the end of the novel?