

## The Beginner's Guide to Living

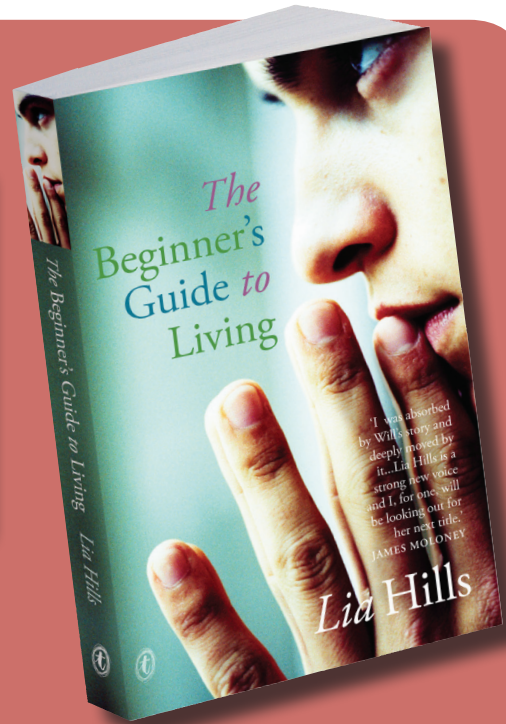
Lia Hills

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### Resource Kit Contains

- Synopsis
- Praise
- Author information
- Themes
- Structure
- Questions for discussion chapter by chapter
- Creative writing
- Debate subjects
- Essay topics

### Synopsis

Will is 17 years old. A challenging time in any young person's life as they straddle the cusp between teenage years and adulthood. Will's time, however, is made all the more difficult when he is faced with the sudden death of his mother. *The Beginner's Guide to Living* is a confronting and thoughtful meditation on what it means to deal with loss and overwhelming grief. Will embarks on a searching journey for the meaning of life and death. His search leads him to the great writers and philosophers, it opens his heart to confusingly intense love and it opens his ears to the wisdom around him. He flirts with self-destruction and also rediscovers his family. Throughout the book, journal-style entries of Will's questions help the reader to understand the pain and confusion he is working through, and the incremental steps he is taking, both forward and back.

### Praise

'I was deeply moved by Will's story...Lia Hills is a strong new voice and I, for one, will be looking out for her new book.' James Moloney

'...thoughtful young adult fiction that addresses the big issues, filtered through the perspective of an adolescent male...The silence and gaps are powerful in their portrayal of loss.' Age

### Author information

Lia Hills is a poet and novelist whose work has been published, performed and translated internationally. She has translated Marie Darrieussecq's novel, *Tom est Mort*, and her translation, *Tom is Dead*, will be published in 2009 by Text. Her award-winning poetry collection,

*the possibility of flight*, is also forthcoming. Born in New Zealand, Lia lives in the hills outside Melbourne with her husband and two young sons.

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### Themes

- Dealing with the shock and desperation of grief is the major theme. How do we come to terms with loss? What is the point of loving if death or some other kind of loss may well follow on?
- Are we all alone? Even his consuming love for Taryn cannot protect him from the loneliness of his grief. Will is so obsessed with his own despair that he has no resources left to understand the suffering of his father and brother. He is cut off from his friends and is filled with rage towards people such as his teachers who try, albeit clumsily, to help him.
- The book deals with the well-meaning but banal and insensitive ways other people, such as Will's great-aunts, try to comfort the grieving.
- Most importantly it presents the reader with a vast array of beliefs and ideas—strategies for dealing with life and death that have been passed down from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the present day. It explores eastern mysticism, western philosophies, mainstream and alternative religions as it looks for the meaning of life.

### Structure

The book is a first person narrative but the narrative is interspersed with photos, which are an important part of the book; with dreams; with suddenly-recalled

memories; with snippets of philosophy; with emails between Will and Taryn, and with aphorisms—those of Will and Taryn as well as those of well-known writers.

This helps us to see the fractured nature of Will's mind at this time, as well as creating a more textured and varied collage of his thoughts and emotions. It also provides a heightened sense of the universality of grief and separation.

The book is divided into three sections, with each section then further divided by a series of chapter headings. As you read through the book, take a moment at the end of each section to consider how the heading was reflected in the text. How do you think they related? Did they influence the way you read?

## ONE

### rip

If we have called the book confronting then the reader is certainly smacked in the face by the first chapter, indeed by the first sentence. 'She looks good for a corpse'. We are immediately faced with the attempts by our culture to camouflage the starkness of death.

What is Will's reaction to this viewing of his mother?

The whole occasion of his mother's death seems false to him. It should have been a momentous occasion, world shattering—but he was listening to music with his friend, Seb. He is filled with a terrible numbness and emptiness. There is a sense of unreality and meaninglessness in the way nature and life continue on around him.

Carefully re-read the short second paragraph on p. 4. What is the effect of the way the sentences are written? Why are the curtains in the next paragraph seen as 'protective sails'?

What sort of clichés and banalities do the frightful great-aunts use at the wake? Why would these women use them? Why would Will find the phrase, 'She is safe now', so appallingly empty and lacking in comfort?

What is the first impression you get of Will's father? What phrase on p5 sums up his suffering? Do you feel any antagonism by Will towards his father in this first chapter? Can you explain this? Is it fair?

Taryn, who is soon to be the love of his life, appears for the first time at the wake. Do you see it as fitting that this should be her first appearance or do you see it as somewhat contrived?

How do you explain the symbolism in his dream?

What is our first impression of Adam? Remember that we mostly see him through Will's eyes and we have to wonder if this will jaundice our view of him or not.

Lia Hills is a poet as well as a novelist. This is evident in phrases like, 'Night collapses on the sixth day.' This opening chapter is very sensual, full of smells and tactile things: the clothes, the hair in the hairbrush, all objects that bring back intense memories. Write down some of the scents, colours, textures or sounds that bring back sharp memories for you.

The camera becomes one of the most potent symbols in the book. What is it about Will's mother's camera that is going to be so significant in this book?

The novel is full of signs. The nearby church says, 'Life's short, God's infinite'. What response does Will give this?

At the end of the chapter Will says, 'I may never sleep again until I do what must be done'. What do you think must be done?

### random light

'Dawn is leaking into my room'. Will knows now that he must find the answers to his questions if he is to cope at all. What are the questions he asks himself in this chapter?

What impressions are you getting of Taryn and her family, of their house, of their view of life? At this point in the book do you feel they will be able to help Will? Why?

Will's antagonism and bitterness towards his father is becoming very obvious. Discuss whether you feel his assumptions are fair or, as Adam suggests, Will is so self-obsessed and cocooned in his own grief that he is incapable of recognising the suffering of others.

### the ultimate truth

Why does Will feel that at home the walls and floors are made of glue?

Will is beginning his search for meaning. He visits the philosophy section of the local library and here the reader is introduced to the first in a long list of philosophers.

As you read the book compile a list of these thinkers and writers. What is the essence of each of their philosophies as they are relevant to Will's situation?

Note that although Will is searching for answers about death, he is surrounded by life: the child in the library and her mother, the yellow book with the plastic sign warm from the sun. Find other examples.

Seneca wrote that it is better to conquer our grief than deceive it. What does he mean by deceiving grief? How can grief be deceived? Have you personally had experience of trying to deceive grief and how successful was it?

The idea of serendipity, of things happening by chance is very strong in this chapter. Make a list of the signs and ideas in the whole novel as well as in this chapter, that point Will in new directions. They have always been there but Will is more receptive to them now. He is constantly coming across strangers such as the woman on the train, who present him with new ideas, not always easily accepted.

Do you believe that if things are meant to happen they will? Discuss whether or not you believe in fate. In the

next chapter Will and Taryn will talk about whether it is better to be able to choose the way you die.

What other questions does Will ask in this chapter?

What do you learn about Nietzsche in this chapter. How does Will feel about his philosophy?

How do you explain Will's behaviour in the pub?

### freefall

Will remembers himself lost in his blankets as a baby, much as he is lost in his grief now, except there is no mother there to rescue him this time. Memories and photos fill this chapter. What is the significance of the photos he takes here?

How does everything that is mentioned in this chapter, for example the mandala and Taryn's caress, relate to his mother in his mind?

We will all die. How dangerous is it to love someone, knowing we may lose them? What is the alternative? Discuss Milton's adage that 'The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make heaven of Hell, and a hell of Heaven'.

Do you agree with George Sand that 'There is only one happiness in life, to love and be loved'?

### setting sail

Will visits the State Library where he finds the writing of Søren Kierkegaard.

'The thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.' Will finds a commonality with Kierkegaard's philosophies. Do we sense it is here that he sets sail although there will still be a long voyage ahead?

Why does Will feel that Kierkegaard is speaking to him personally?

Do you agree that knowledge equals happiness?

Is Will ready now for the open sea?

### waves

'No matter what winter we have entered, outside it's still spring'. Will is faced with the difficult realisation that outside his grief life is still going on and he is expected to as well. How do people react to the grief of others?

Following the traumas of his first day at school, Will and Taryn take their relationship to a new level. How do you think this affects Will emotionally?

### erosophy

What is meant by eros?

What do you learn about Plato and Socrates from this chapter?

Do you believe that Will fell in love with Taryn because of what happened to his mother?

What did Socrates mean by saying 'there is something immortal in mortality'?

Who was Chekhov? What did he mean by 'being in love shows a person who he should be'? What does Will's love of Taryn teach him about himself?

His mother told him that falling in love for the first time was like waking up. Does this happen to Will?

### know thyself

Why is it important for Will to know himself? What does this mean?

Does his encounter with the girl outside the station ring true?

What is he searching for in the sensual beauty of the cathedral? Does he find it? Why does he deliberately burn his finger on the candle wax?

What is the significance of the memories and dreams at the end of this chapter?

### life in a glasshouse

This chapter is full of anger and bitterness. Why is some of this directed to Seb and Jackie?

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## TWO

### the dance

Here Samara introduces Will to eastern philosophy. What do we learn about it from this chapter?

Do you agree that we are all aspects of God?

### kiss the joy as it flies

Do you believe that today we deny death?

Will questions whether he is able to recognise truth and ironically fails to recognise his father's grief as it manifests itself in the incident of the laundry detergent.

Do you agree with the poet Blake that we should 'kiss the joy as it flies'?

### by the world forgot

Here Will learns that his mother lost a baby. He also learns that everyone's memories are unique and that everyone must face death.

What is meant by 'The world forgetting by the world forgot'?

### celebration

The celebration turns sour. Why?

Adam tells Will he should stop trying to solve the problems of the universe. Do you agree?

### whisper

Why is Will unable to talk to his father?

### if water had memory

Why is Will so uncharacteristically rude in the chemistry class?

What is meant by water having memory?

Why is Will feeling so detached from the world? He says his 'body has disconnected from the flow of the world'.

### arrows and maxims

After sex and discussions of the difference between Eastern and Western philosophy, Will sees 'clouds like scrawled statements above the lake' and begins to write his own statements about life—aphorisms—tiny encapsulations of wisdom.

Write some aphorisms of your own.

Do you believe it is possible to sum up essential truths in a few words without becoming trite or meaningless?

In what ways can they be helpful in concentrating your thoughts? Or do you agree with Will when he says, 'If life could be explained in one sentence it would contain no words'?

### mantra

Will's search turns to meditation. Have you practised meditation? How effective have you found it? What different kinds of meditation do you know about?

## THREE

### break on through

Will turns to alcohol, to violence against Adam, to music in an effort to find consolation. Do any of these work? Why is Will so violent to Adam? Does alcohol help him?

### life's longing

At the naming ceremony he chats with his small cousin, Essie. What is her interpretation of Will's mother's death, and of life and death in general? What is Will's reaction to this?

### dervish

Will is feeling his pursuit of answers lacks passion, lacks intensity. He feels a fire within that needs expressing and, inspired by the Whirling Dervishes, he launches into reckless pursuits.

How does Marcus Aurelius also inspire this recklessness?

What actions does Will try for the first time? What affect do they have?

How does Cherry contribute?

What is Taryn's reaction to his behaviour?

Is Will cautious even in self-destruction, always allowing himself a way back?

### glimpses from the cavern

What is meant by an 'existential crisis'? Again this question is framed by a stranger on a bus. Do you feel these people who suddenly appear in his life really exist or are only in his mind?

In any case he is desperate for escape and turns to experimenting with hard drugs. But, as Cherry says, drugs are all about need and the results are very disappointing. He needs to 'open the doors of perception but there is nothing there'. What does this mean?

What is the point of the photograph on p. 187?

Has Will, as Blake says, 'closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern'?

### a small death

Will is palpably changing. This is very obvious in his self-obsessed and violent sexual assault on Taryn, which leads to the threat of the end of their relationship.

Has he 'cast off into the great roaring ocean without an anchor'?

### rites of passage

Will wonders about Anais Nin's adage that people 'living deeply have no fear of death'. He begins to feel the futility of looking for comfort in other people's words.

There is the further complication in his life of Taryn's possible pregnancy and its inevitable question of whether one life can replace another. There is also the question of whether he could possibly be responsible for another life when he can't deal with his own.

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## FOUR

### *mystic on the fringe*

Will leaves a note and runs away. Why does he do this? What does he hope to achieve?

Who does he meet? Again there is this sense of fate, of inevitability.

### *chaos theory*

Sitting in the bush he feels a gentle emptying and a realisation that in the end all great thinkers were just thinking 'their own truth'. What is it that is emptying from him?

How do the philosophers give him companionship?

What is Saul teaching him about his life?

What is the significance of Will's dream about his mother?

Why is it important to know we have a 'capacity for love'?

### *sleepwalking*

What did you learn about Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre from this chapter?

Explain what Saul means by 'living authentically'.

Will is forced to confront the fact that it is possible to become 'confused by ideas'. What do you think this means? He has also to face the fact that we are all alone and will die alone.

Note carefully the last paragraph on p. 231. How does this acute awareness of his physical self show that he is ready to take up life again?

### *leap*

Is Will able to recognise the anxiety he has caused his family? Is Adam right when he says that everything is about Will?

Do you think that the family reconciliation means that the three men are healed and ready to go on with life?

How do you interpret the lines, 'The house is thick with grief but there are doors and windows'?

### *the divinity of love*

Will has found a desire in himself 'for something beyond logic'. Do you think this means that by the end of the novel he has found a belief in God?

Do you believe we are 'hardwired to believe in something that does not exist'?

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## CREATIVE WRITING

- Saul writes a letter every year—not to be opened but containing who and what has been important in his life.
- Write such a letter, discussing who and what has played a formative part in your life during the past year.

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## SUBJECTS FOR DEBATE

- 'Anxiety is an illogical response to the meaninglessness of life.' (Sartre)
- 'A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.' (Montaigne)
- 'To open your eye is to risk getting something in it.' (Will)

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## ESSAY TOPICS

- 'Do you reckon everything's going to be all right?' Will asks Adam. Referring closely to the book, explain how you feel about the possible outcome for the characters.
- Taryn suggests that 'we should all run naked through our fears'. Discuss with close reference to the text how Will has run naked through his fears and what has been the outcome for him.
- How does Hills' use of photos, dreams, memories and quotations from thinkers, along with the poetic images of her writing, help to convey her complex themes?