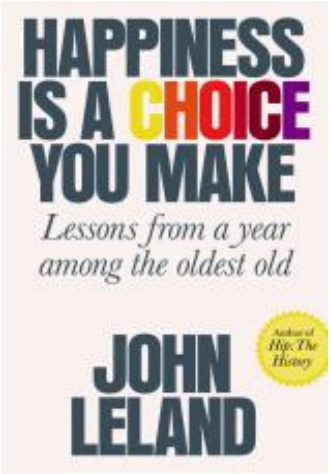
Happiness Is a Choice You Make: Lessons from a Year Among the Oldest Old

by John Leland



About the Book

An extraordinary look at what it means to grow old and a heartening guide to well-being, HAPPINESS IS A CHOICE YOU MAKE weaves together the stories and wisdom of six New Yorkers who number among the ?oldest old? --- those 85 and up.

In 2015, when the award-winning journalist John Leland set out on behalf of *The New York Times* to meet members of America?s fastest-growing age group, he anticipated learning of challenges, of loneliness, and of the deterioration of body, mind and quality of life. But the elders he met took him in an entirely different direction. Despite disparate backgrounds and circumstances, they each lived with a surprising lightness and contentment. The reality Leland encountered upended contemporary notions of aging, revealing the late stages of life as unexpectedly rich and the elderly as incomparably wise.

HAPPINESS IS A CHOICE YOU MAKE is an enduring collection of lessons that emphasizes, above all, the extraordinary influence we wield over the quality of our lives. With humility, heart and wit, Leland has crafted a sophisticated and necessary reflection on how to ?live better? --- informed by those who have mastered the art.

Discussion Guide

1. Is there one character you related to more strongly than the others?

2. Did the book change the way you think about old age?

3. The author said he envied the closeness of the Willigs, and wished his mother approached her life with Fred?s positive outlook. Are there traits among the elders you?d like to model in your life? What part of Ping?s character do you wish

you had more of? How about John?s?

4. Love and sex are of widely different levels of concern to the various elders. Why do you think Helen puts such a premium on her attractiveness and her relationship with Howie, while some of the others are content to put that behind them?

5. Did the book make you reconsider at what point a life is no longer worth living?

6. The ?paradox of aging? --- that older people are more content than younger ones --- seems contrary to our cultural assumptions. How do you explain this contentment? Why do you think it isn?t more widely recognized?

7. Did Fred?s example inspire you to practice gratitude in a more concentrated way? If so, what were the results? If not, why not?

8. Did you find the author?s personal story relevant to the account of the six elders?

9. How much influence do you think we have over our levels of satisfaction as we age? Are some people just born to be happy, others not?

10. What do you think about the idea of ?gerotranscendence? --- that as people get older, they give up less important concerns and focus on what really matters?

11. The book cites research showing that people with negative attitudes toward aging die earlier than people with positive views. Yet negative views of aging are all around us. What examples have you observed in the last week? How can people resist absorbing these views?

12. The book talks about the value of accepting our mortality. Do you think it?s really possible to do this?

13. Is there someone in your life who you think needs this book?

Author Bio

John Leland is a reporter at *The New York Times,* where he wrote a yearlong series that became the basis for HAPPINESS IS A CHOICE YOU MAKE, and the author of two previous books*:* HIP: The History and WHY KEROUAC MATTERS: The Lessons of ?On the Road? (They?re Not What You Think). Before joining the *Times*, he was a senior editor at *Newsweek,* editor in chief of *Details*, a reporter at *Newsday*, and a writer and editor at *Spin* magazine.

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