Beginner's Luck

by Laura Pedersen

About the Book

The second of seven children (with another on the way), Hallie Palmer has one dream: to make it to Vegas. Normally blessed with an uncanny gift for winning at games of chance, she's just hit a losing streak. She's been kicked out of the casino she frequents during school hours, lost all her money for a car on a bad bet at the track, and has been grounded by her parents. Hallie decides the time as come to cut her losses.

Answering an ad in the local paper, she lands a job as yard person at the elegant home of the sixty-ish Mrs. Olivia Stockton, a wonderfully eccentric rebel who scribes acclaimed poetry along with the occasional soft-core porn story. Under the same wild roof is Olivia's son, Bernard, an antiques dealer and gourmet cook who turns out mouthwatering cuisine and scathing witticisms, and Gil, Bernard's lover, whose down-to-earth sensibilities provide a perfect foil to the Stocktons' outrageous *joie de vivre*. Here, in this anything-goes household, Hallie has found a new family. And she's about to receive the education of her life.

From a wonderful new voice in fiction comes the freshest and funniest novel to barrel down the pike since **Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café**. In **Beginner's Luck**, Laura Pedersen introduces us to the endearing oddballs and eccentrics of Cosgrove County, Ohio, who burst to life and steal our hearts?and none more so than Hallie Palmer, sixteen, savvy, and wise beyond her years, a young woman who knows life is a gamble . . . and sometimes you have to bet the house.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think Hallie's mother is never given a first name throughout the entire story?

2. Officer Rich is an African American in a predominantly white town. Do you think this makes him more empathetic to Hallie's feeling that she doesn't fit in?

3. Is it wrong for Olivia to seek companionship outside of her marriage while her husband is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, even though there's no possibility for his recovery?

4. Craig's parents are able to provide much more by way of material comforts and individual attention for their only child than Hallie's parents can for their seven children. Is this a sword that can cut both ways when it comes to the best interests of a child, or is one scenario better than the other?

5. If Craig is accustomed to a normal home life and has everything-- he's a football star, smart, and has money for college and mate-rial items like his own car, computer, and TV--why do you think he's attracted to Hallie and the Stocktons?

6. Is there any character in which you see yourself or one of your friends, coworkers, or family members?

7. Do you think Bernard and Olivia enjoy being different, or are they just being true to themselves?

8. From what the guys at the poker game tell Hallie about the Stocktons, it appears that the Judge never knew his son was gay. Do you think the Judge's slow demise would have been any less traumatic for Bernard if his father had known about his sexual orientation?

9. Hallie's parents object to their daughter residing at the Stockton house on the grounds that it's not a Christian home. They object without really even trying to get to know the Stocktons. Can you think of examples where people may slightly twist their religious beliefs to justify a personal agenda?

10. Olivia's behavior can seem contradictory. One minute she speaks as if she doesn't care what people think, but then she does something to suggest she cares very much. Is this because her heart occasionally takes over for her mind, or because she really does care but just doesn't want to admit it?

11. Gil's family appears to have disowned him for being gay. Hallie has elected to leave her family, at least temporarily. Meanwhile, Olivia and Bernard are constantly disagreeing and bickering. What does all this say about the challenges of being part of a family? Should one always strive to reach understandings, or is it sometimes necessary to break away from family members?

12. Though we are told the Judge's first name, he's never called it or referred to by it. Also, he never speaks. Whether he hears or not is unclear. Is it possible the Judge is symbolic of an entity overseeing the action? Is it significant that he dies at Christmastime?

13. Although Hallie isn't aware of it at the time, her parents sign her guardianship over to Bernard. Is it true, as the adage goes, that if you really love something you should set it free?

14. One night when she can't sleep Hallie reminisces about how things went wrong in the relationship with her mother. Yet she can't come up with one specific moment or incident. Do most young adults arrive at a point where they're going

to oppose authority just for the sake of being oppositional? Is this just part of growing up?

15. Hallie's brother Eric and sister Louise appear happy and contented to follow the house rules and engage in the typical rou-tines of teenagers in their school and town. Why is it easier for some people to adhere to "the norm" than others?

16. Is there any one moment or particular incident where you would say Hallie transitions from child to adult, or is this a gradual evolution based on a series of events?

17. Most of us eventually become a version of our parents. Do you think Hallie will turn out to be more like her mom or more like Olivia?

18. Has your own definition of family changed and expanded over the years to include some select friends? What makes a person "like family" to you?

Author Bio

Laura Pedersen is a former *New York Times* columnist and the author of 16 books and four plays. She has appeared on national shows, including "Oprah," "Good Morning America," "CBS This Morning," "Today," "Primetime," "Late Show with David Letterman" and many others. Her book LIFE IN NEW YORK won the Seven Sisters Book Award for best nonfiction. Laura writes for several well-known comedians.

Critical Praise

"FUNNY, SWEET-NATURED, AND WELL-CRAFTED . . . Pedersen has created a wonderful assemblage of . . . whimsical characters and charm."

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