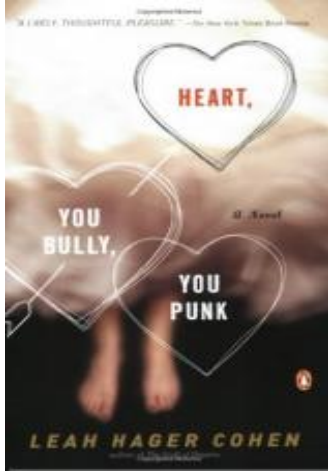


# Heart, You Bully, You Punk

by Leah Hager Cohen

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## About the Book

A high school girl, her father, and her math teacher. In **Heart, You Bully, You Punk**, Leah Hager Cohen uses this unlikely triangle to chart the complexities of the human heart.

Esker (she prefers to go solely by her last name) is a thirty-one-year-old high school teacher at the Prospect School in Brooklyn who, after various heartbreaks and disappointments, has found a quiet resolve in her lonely spinster routine. But when a mysterious fall leaves her star math student injured and housebound until exams, Esker begins tutoring the precocious teenager at home. And soon, much against her will, she begins falling edgily, haltingly in love with the girl's father. Charged with Esker's own irreverence and wit, **Heart, You Bully, You Punk** sweeps us irresistibly into her profound and wistful struggle to unite the rest of her self with her unruly heart.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Regarding Ann's mysterious fall from the gym bleachers, the narrator says, "It was like all those times you're looking out over the edge of a balcony thinking, 'What if I can't fight the urge to jump?' and of course you never do jump, some little primitive, vestigial switch inside your body prevents you from ever doing so?only last Friday hers malfunctioned. But, oh, it was exhilarating." Compare this to Esker's many reflections on New York University's library, and the ways in which its design tempted her to jump. Do you think that the author is using the choice to jump or not to jump as a metaphor for a core difference in the way Ann and Esker perceive life and its risks?

2. Consider one of Esker's true passions, geometry, and how it presents itself in the designs and patterns that surround us every day. How does the author use this throughout the novel? Apply this, for instance, to the architecture of the spaces that they occupy at home and at work. How does Esker's apartment offer the reader further insight into her character? What about Wally and Ann's home, as well as the restaurant Game? Do the spaces influence them or are they influenced by the spaces?
3. Did the teenagers depicted in the novel seem to be more sophisticated than their age? If so, how and why? Do you think we underestimate the nuances of life that teenagers are able to detect and digest? Or, do you think Ann James and her propensity for "falling" is a consequence of leaving an adolescent to her own devices in an emotionally complicated situation?
4. Discuss Wally's restaurant. How does author use it as a symbol and metaphor? What do you think Alice's intentions were when she bought that business for her husband?
5. Why do you think Alice and Wally didn't pursue a divorce? How did Alice make you feel? What did she have that Esker lacked, and vice versa?
6. In your estimation, is Esker in love with Wally? If so, compare the outcome of their relationship to that of her and Albert's. How do you account for the manner in which Esker exits the emergency room at the end of the novel?
7. After Ann's initial fall from the bleachers, Wally says that her confinement to the sofa forced an intimacy between the two. Did you see evidence of that in their relationship?
8. How do the blue casts benefit Ann? Why does she cry when the doctor removes them?
9. Is Ann mentally ill? Are there passages in the novel that imply this?
10. Discuss Albert's ghost. Is he really gone at the end of the novel, or is Esker's reluctance to get involved with Wally an indication that she hasn't let go? Do all of the characters have ghosts? If so, elaborate. Are there certain characters that have ghostly qualities?
11. In the end, is Esker "bullied" out of a relationship with Wally by her heart, or is it an indication that she's taking control of her life? Do you believe that the author has left room in the story for Esker to choose to be with Wally sometime in the future?

## Author Bio

Leah Hager Cohen is the author of four nonfiction books, including *TRAIN GO SORRY* and *GLASS, PAPER, BEANS*, and three novels, most recently *HOUSE LIGHTS*. Among the honors her books have received are New York Times Notable Book (four times); American Library Association Ten Best Books of the Year; Toronto Globe and Mail Ten Best Books of the Year; and Booksense 76 Pick.

She holds the Jenks Chair in Contemporary American Letters at the College of the Holy Cross, and teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Lesley University. She is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*.

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