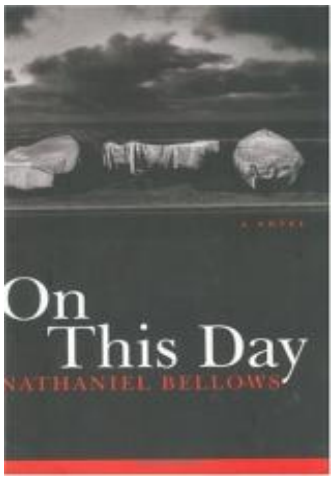
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On This Day

by Nathaniel Bellows



About the Book

In damp, quiet, coastal Maine, Warren, Joan, and their mother have lost their much-loved father and husband to the unexpected onslaught of cancer. Still reeling from his death weeks later, their mother, mired in grief and desperately unable to resurface, commits suicide.

On This Day, told in Warren's voice, is the intimate story of the aftermath the young siblings inherit. Joan and Warren must acclimate to a new life without parental guidance or the assurance of safety and peace while dodging the sly machinations of family and friends who stand to gain from their tremendous loss. They struggle together to make peace and a life for themselves in a page-turning emotionally harrowing novel that confronts the many faces of grief and memory, family ties, loyalty, and self-preservation.

Discussion Guide

1. Bellows takes great care to bring coastal Maine to life for his readers, detailing the proximity of the many small islands and the origins of their various names. As young adults, how do Joan and Warren orient themselves to the world? What purpose does the familiar town and family house serve in the wake of their parents' deaths?

2. At several points in the novel, Joan and Warren have contradicting memories of the same events. Given their close relationship and the amount of time spent in each other's company, what do these differing recollections suggest? Given their abrupt orphan status, do accurate memories gain added importance? How do Joan and Warren resolve these discrepancies and what do they gain, if anything, in the process?

3. Joan and Warren are the victims of grave injustices, but share a primitive sibling attachment to each other. How do they cope with both parents' deaths, the unexpected loss of the nursery and the unsavory interests of their relatives? Do they manage to keep their heads above water, financially and emotionally, and how do they change in the process?

4. Does the death of their father take on new or altered meaning after their mother takes her life? Do they judge either parent with recriminations and criticisms? Is there an element of taboo to their mother's death?

5. As a character, what purpose does Valerie serve in the novel? What does Warren's attraction and interest in her indicate about his emotional development and outlook on life? Is he maturing "normally" or is he somewhat stunted by recent events?

6. What do Warren and Joan do to help their grief-stricken and ailing mother? In the wake of their father's battle with cancer, how is the parent/child relationship turned on its head? Do Joan and Warren mature under the stress of their desperate circumstances or do their circumstances define their outlook? What are the differences in the siblings' reactions?

7. The house falls into disrepair after their mother's suicide. Joan and Warren quarrel over the curtains and the kitchen. What does this all symbolize? How does the state of the house and the petty arguments tie into memory, loss, and hope?

8. Though Auntie E's motives may seem less than honorable to Joan and Warren, she continuously offers her help and support in an effort to keep strong what she remembers as a good relationship. Are Joan and Warren on the defensive and thereby misinterpreting her good intentions? Does Auntie E harbor selfish motives and if so, what can she gain by ingratiating herself to them? How do Joan and Warren's opinions of Auntie E differ?

9. Warren takes a renewed interest in piano lessons. His first conversations with Mr. Trego make him uncomfortable, though he's not sure why. What does Warren hope to accomplish by resuming the lessons? What does he discover about himself during the time spent practicing with Mr. Trego? Why does he ultimately stop the lessons?

10. How do Joan and Warren's feelings for their mother change after their father's death? As she becomes increasingly isolated in her grief, what is their response to each other and to her? How does this torrent of mixed emotions affect Joan and Warren after her death?

11. What is the effect of having Warren narrate the novel? How might it have taken on new or altered meaning if it were told from another character's perspective? How does Warren evolve throughout and what does he come to know about death and the tenacity of life?

12. How are the notions of trust, love, and forgiveness explored in the book? Which characters seem the most authentic in their actions/intentions (bad or good)?

13. Warren and Joan are deeply connected, but they also live lives apart from each other -- Warren at the library and at his piano lessons, and Joan at the bakery and with Mike. How do these experiences and environments contribute to them as individuals? How do they contribute to their deep connection?

Author Bio

Nathaniel Bellows was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1972. He is a visual artist and has published poetry in the *New York Times Book Review*, the*Paris Review*, the *New Republic*, and other journals. He lives in New York.

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