



A Year and a Day

By Leslie Pietrzyk
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Introduction

Fifteen-year-old Alice dreams of her first kiss, has sleepovers, makes prank calls, auditions for "Our Town," and tries to pass high school biology. It's 1975, and at first look, her life would seem to be normal and unexceptional. But in the world that Leslie Pietrzyk paints, every moment she chronicles is revealed through the kaleidoscope of loss, stained by the fact that Alice's mother, without warning, without apology, explanation, or note, deliberately parks her car onto the railroad tracks, into the path of an oncoming train.

In the emotional year that follows, Alice and her older brother find themselves in the care of their great aunt, forced to cope and move forward after their catastrophic loss. Lonely and confused, Alice absorbs herself in her mother Annette's familiar rituals, trying to recapture their connection -- only to be stunned by the sound of her mother's voice speaking to her clear as day as she flips Sunday morning pancakes. Driven to understand who her mother was, Alice distances herself from her girlfriends and brother as she engages in "conversations" with Annette. As she works through her grief, Alice slowly begins to see Annette as an individual, separate from simply "my mother" -- and ultimately embraces the bittersweet knowledge that the lives to which we are most intimately connected often remain the most mysterious of all.

Taking its title from the pop-psychology idea that it should only take a year to get over the death of a loved one, **A Year and a Day** is an intense and deeply affecting portrait of how the human heart counters tragedy and can spin hard won triumph out of the deepest despair. A redemptive, often humorous meditation on growing up and growing into oneself, this is an intimate and heart warming novel to curl up with and to savor.

Questions for Discussion

1. How did Alice's emotional journey in **A Year and a Day** remind you of struggles or experiences with coping with loss in your own life? Did you feel that Pietrzyk's portrayal of the stages of grief reflected the emotional impact of loss of an adolescent, or do you feel that a reader of any age could relate to Alice's pain?
2. Pietrzyk chose a quote from Anne Sexton to begin the novel. How did Sexton's words set a frame through which to view the events of the novel? How did Sexton's words about the circle of life and unstoppable march of time speak to **A Year and a Day**? What do you think that Alice would make of them?
3. Describe Alice's and Will's relationship and how it changes through the course of the book. Why do you think this tragedy doesn't draw them closer? Why do Will and Alice have such a difficult time talking to each other truthfully about what they're feeling? How did a journey through grief change Alice's perception of her brother from someone who was "perfect, strong Will" to someone more like herself -- with flaws, and private pain?
4. What observations can you make about the passage of time in this book? What does the title refer to? How is the title reinforced by the organization of the book and its chapters?
5. Making pancakes on Sunday morning is one ritual Alice tries to recreate. What other rituals appear in this book? What is the purpose of a ritual; why does Alice think trying to recreate rituals will help her? How do others in the family respond to these rituals?
6. Why is Dotty King initially so appealing to Alice? How do Alice's perceptions of her change after they meet? How do the other adult women Alice encounters after her mother's death succeed and fail her as potential role models?
7. Do you agree with Annette when she tells Alice, "Everyone lives their real life in secret?" What are the various secrets that are exposed throughout the book? What are the reasons people have for keeping these secrets? Are they justified? What happens in the book when these secrets are shared with others?
8. Why does Annette keep insisting that she's "right here" when, in fact, she's dead? Are there ways people remain with us after they die? Mrs. Lane says that death is "the most fair thing there is because we all die." Do you agree with her? Why or why not?
9. Alice wonders, "Were you allowed to twist everything into a nicer story just because you wanted to?" What do you think? What are the ways various characters throughout the book seek more pleasant versions of the truth? Is this approach helpful for them?
10. In what ways does Alice try to be like her mother? Does doing things her mother did help Alice understand Annette any better? Compare the reasons Annette wanted to play the role of Emily in *Our Town* with Alice's reasons for wanting the part.
11. Alice thinks about her mother: "Who was she before she became Mama, my mother? Had I ever wondered about that?" Do children completely understand their parents' lives? What insight does Alice gain in trying to imagine various aspects of her mother's life? Do you think Alice will ever fully understand why her mother committed suicide?
12. Why do you think Annette returned to Shelby after she ran away? Why did Will return to Shelby; why did he leave in the first place? Compare their reasons for leaving and returning.
13. What different "voices" echo throughout this book? Why do you think the author chose to present Annette primarily as a voice that only Alice hears? Do you believe such a thing could happen? Why doesn't Alice tell her brother or her great-aunt about hearing her mother's voice? Why does Alice finally tell Mrs. Lane about hearing her mother's voice? What do you think about Mrs. Lane's response to Alice?
14. About holding her dead mother's hand, Alice says, "... though I was touching her, I wasn't; though she was there in front of me, she wasn't. I had never seen so clearly how two opposing things could both be true." What does Alice mean? What are some of the other instances throughout the book where two "opposing things" both seem to be true?

About the Author

Leslie Pietrzyk is the author of **Pears on a Willow Tree**. Her short fiction has appeared in many literary journals, including *TriQuarterly*, *Shenandoah*, and the *Iowa Review*. She lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

