

Olivia Strauss is Running Out of Time

Reading Group Guide



A woman has no choice left but to enjoy the adventure of life – and its surprises – in a funny and emotionally moving comedy of errors about the gifts of growing older.

Olivia Strauss is turning thirty-nine. No major milestone. She still considers herself young. At least young enough to assume she has decades (emphasis on the plural) to check the unchecked boxes of her life's to-do list.

Ballerina? Too late. But not too late for poet. Or for reigniting the romantic spark in her marriage, spending more quality time with her son, switching careers, learning to cook, or even dyeing her hair a bright bohemian pink. She'll get to that one. There's time—until Olivia's best friend, Marian, gives her a birthday present she could have lived without.

It's a visit to a trendy wellness clinic with a state-of-the-art genetic test that can predict the exact date of one's death. It's just what Olivia's always wanted: an expiration date. As for her aspirations, who knew they were limited-time offers? One thing's for sure. Olivia's got a lot of living to do. At this point, what could go wrong?

*Note: In order to provide thought-provoking questions, some spoilers about the novel are revealed below. Please wait until you finish reading the book to review the questions.

1. Early in the novel, Olivia describes her love of lists: “I’ve been a list maker my whole adult life. Lists have always made me feel in control, like I could easily manage any earthly calamity so long as I organized the solution into the appropriate number of bullet points,” (page 7). Why do you think this is one of the first personality traits Olivia tells the reader about herself? What does the reader learn about her? Do Olivia’s lists help her or limit her?
2. According to Olivia, “once you hit a certain age, everyone stops talking about their pasts. I hardly knew where the women on our street had gone to college. I didn’t know their maiden names,” (page 17). Discuss Olivia’s relationship with her neighbors at the start of the text. Why does Olivia feel so disconnected from them? How do her relationships with these women evolve over the course of the story?
3. During their brunch, Marian tells Olivia that, “it’s okay to be happy and to still have things about your life that you want to change,” (page 42). Discuss your thoughts about this statement.
4. What purpose do you believe Sunshine serves in the novel? Why do you think she and Olivia develop a friendship by the end of the story? In what ways are they similar? Different? What can Olivia learn from Sunshine that she cannot learn from the other women in her town?
5. How do the two major settings – Olivia’s suburb and New York City – influence the novel? What parts of Olivia’s personality are highlighted in each location? By the end of the novel, does Olivia still “fit” in both places? How does Olivia’s relationship with and understanding of both settings change throughout the story?
6. By the end of the book, do you think Olivia is selfish or selfless for the many decisions she makes on her journey to changing her life? Is it possible to keep having personal goals while also having a job and a family? Is there an age cutoff for one’s dreams? Explain your thoughts.

7. In one of the final scenes, Olivia reflects on the following: “Sometimes, you just have to sit quietly with your grief and give it room to breathe” (page 335). In the months between her thirty-ninth and fortieth birthdays, Olivia experiences different types of grief – grief for parts of her past, grief for goals she never achieved, grief for dreams she accepts she no longer wants to pursue, and ultimately her grief for Marian. Discuss Olivia’s relationship with grief throughout the story. Does she grow from it? In what ways does grief help her better understand her own life?
8. Is Marian’s choice to hide her illness from Olivia cruel or is it an act of love? Discuss your feelings about Marian’s decision.
9. What do you think is ultimately the real reason for change in Olivia? Is it the “expiration date” or something else?
10. And, of course, the one question that must be asked: if *you* had the chance to find out the date of your death, would you want to know?



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Angela Brown's writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Real Simple*, and other publications. She holds an MFA from Fairleigh Dickinson University. Angela lives in New Jersey with her husband and two young children, where she is currently at work on her second novel.

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