The Westport Library...

Discussion Guide

“Crucial, heart-breaking, and inspiring.” —Jennifer Finney Boylan, author of She’s Not There, and Stuck in the Middle with You

DONNA GEPHART

Lily and Dunkin

Let the world see you.
This Discussion guide was assembled by the

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Summary

Lily and Dunkin have a chance meeting just before entering eighth grade and sense an immediate connection; both harbor deep secrets. Gephart expertly weaves the characters’ separate but similar struggles with school, family, and society with concurrent narratives. Lily was assigned male at birth but has always felt she is a girl; she’s pressuring her family to give her hormone blockers as she races toward puberty. Her dad is the holdout, wanting only to protect his child from ridicule and danger. Norbert (who hates that name but loves Dunkin Donuts) has bipolar disorder and has been forced to move in with his grandma after something mysterious happened to his father. During school, a group called the “Neanderthals” attack Lily with insults and bullying, while courting gigantic Dunkin into strengthening their basketball team's chance at a championship. Lily also gets wrapped up in the city’s decision to cut down her favorite tree, while Dunkin begins skipping his meds in order to perform better on the court. The conclusions are both satisfying and provocative. The narration provided by Ryan Gesell and Michael Crouch is excellent. Also exceptional are the author’s personal notes at the end about how and why this important story came about and Pat Scales’s thought-provoking discussion questions.

Listeners who enjoyed Jazz Jennings’s Being Jazz or Holly Goldberg Sloan’s Counting by 7s will appreciate this unique tale, a timely novel suitable for any middle school kid who feels different.

Author Bio

(by the author, Donna Gephart)

Growing up, the local library was my second home. When I was little, my mom took me every week. As I got older, I rode my bike and filled the basket with books. Those books filled lots of lonely days. My favorite books then were Mr. Popper's Penguins and Ben and Me. What are your favorite books?

Here, I'm about age nine (or eight or ten). That's when I sat at our kitchen table, bored out of my skull, and wrote my first short story -- "Happy-Go-Lucky." It was about a horse who died. Even though it had a sad ending, my mom really liked it. That's when I decided to become a writer.

I loved seventh grade. I was in the school play, Music Man, and I made a meal worm city in Ms. Silbert’s science class. I went to my first boy/girl parties and placed 2nd in the school talent show for my hula hoop skills (really). I should have won 1st place, but it’s not like I’m bitter or anything. During graduation, I won a huge dictionary for excelling in… math! (I still use that dictionary today.)

Eighth grade, which back then started junior high for me, wasn't so much fun. I liked a boy who didn't like me. I wore braces. I felt awkward and uncomfortable almost all the time, and I never got invited to any parties. Besides all that, my emotions seemed to be on a roller coaster ride I had no control over. So… no photos from then!

High school was better. I wrote articles for the school newspaper and our local weekly newspaper, played tennis, won a couple writing contests, worked part-time at a shoe store, got good grades and enjoyed hanging out with my buds.

College was better still. I worked really hard, but had loads of fun, too. I climbed Mount Nittany. Twice. I spent a lot of time at The Creamery. And the library. I loved my short story writing class. Overall, I had a wonderful time living in Happy Valley, attending Penn State. Here I am with my roommate, Linda, celebrating her graduation.

After graduating from college, I moved back to Philadelphia and married this great guy. Dan and I have been married more than twenty years and have two terrific sons, who are now way taller than I am! I spent several years working as an editor at a greeting card company. After that, I worked from home to raise our sons and write for greeting card companies, magazines and, of course, publishers of books for children, like Penguin Random House.

Now, the books I write are on the shelves of that library I used to love as a kid. And I get to meet lots of wonderful people at bookstores, school visits, libraries and conferences. I love what I do -- writing, enjoying time with family and friends, writing, hanging out at the local library and bookstore, writing, riding my bike, volunteering, traveling, writing, taking long walks along the beach and through the woods, writing, and attending local S.C.B.W.I, groups. Oh, and writing!

http://www.donnagephart.com/detailed-author-bio.html
Book Reviews

A JLG Selection!
An Indie Next Pick!
Amazon Best Book of the Month!
CBC's May Hot Off the Press!
An NAIBA Seasonal Pick!
Another Indie Favorite Title!

"Gephart clearly has a lot of heart, and she tells their stories with compassion."-- Kirkus

"A thoughtfully and sensitive written work of character-driven fiction that dramatically addresses two important subjects that deserve more widespread attention."-- Booklist, starred

"Gephart sympathetically contrasts the physical awkwardness, uncertainty, and longings of these two outsiders during a few tightly-plotted
months, building to a crescendo of revelation...[A] valuable portrait of two teenagers whose journeys are just beginning."-- PW

"This would be a fantastic addition to any middle grade library collection, and is highly recommended for all ages."-- VOYA

Review by Booklist Review

"Starred Review* I guess everyone has secrets, 13-year-old Tim muses, and his secret is known only to his family and his best friend, Dare. Born a boy, Tim knows he is really a girl named Lily. And then there is her new friend Norbert, whom she has nicknamed Dunkin (acknowledging his passion for Dunkin Donuts). Dunkin has a secret, too: he is bipolar. Though not ready to make her transition public, Lily bravely begins to make gestures in that direction: painting her fingernails, wearing lipstick, and so on all this despite the bullying she receives from the boys she dubs the Neanderthals. Meanwhile, Dunkin has made their middle-school basketball team and, to ensure he has the energy to play, goes off his meds. The two young teens tell their increasingly compelling stories in alternating first-person chapters. Though both stories are emotionally powerful, Dunkin's comes perilously close to eclipsing Lily's, but nevertheless both characters are irresistibly appealing, and Gephart beautifully manages their evolution. Though in less skillful hands this might have turned into a problem novel, it is, instead, a thoughtfully and sensitively written work of character-driven fiction that dramatically addresses two important subjects that deserve more widespread attention. --Cart, Michael Copyright 2016 Booklist

Review by Publisher's Weekly Review

With humor and great sensitivity, Gephart (Death by Toilet Paper) juxtaposes the efforts of two eighth-graders-one struggling with gender dysphoria, one with mental illness-to establish new identities for themselves. Determined, gentle, and self-aware Tim was "born with boy parts" but identifies as a girl, preferring the name Lily; already "out" to her family and best friend Dare. Lily is both excited and terrified about reactions to a more public transformation. Meanwhile, mercurial newcomer Norbert hates his name-but loves the nickname Lily gives him, Dunkin, which alludes to his favorite haunt-and keeps deep secrets, even from himself. Their friendship develops slowly as Dunkin, desperate for acceptance, gets swept up by an intolerant basketball-playing crowd. Gephart sympathetically contrasts the physical awkwardness, uncertainty, and longings of these two outsiders during a few tightly-plotted months, building to a crescendo of revelation. Strong, supportive women accept these teens as they are, while their fathers struggle mightily. Despite an overly tidy resolution to Dunkin's story and Lily being a bit too perfect, it's a valuable portrait of two teenagers whose journeys are just beginning. Ages 10-up. Agent: Tina Wexler, ICM. (May) © Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

Review by School Library Journal Review

Gr 5-8-Lily and Dunkin have a chance meeting just before entering eighth grade and sense an immediate connection; both harbor deep secrets. Gephart expertly weaves the characters' separate but similar struggles with school, family, and society with concurrent narratives. Lily was assigned male at birth but has always felt she is a girl; she's pressuring her family to give her hormone blockers as she races toward puberty. Her dad is the holdout, wanting only to protect his child from ridicule and danger. Norbert (who hates that name but loves Dunkin Donuts) has bipolar disorder and has been forced to move in with his grandma after something mysterious happened to his father. During school, a group called the "Neanderthals" attack Lily with insults and bullying, while courting gigantic Dunkin into strengthening their basketball team's chance at a championship. Lily also gets wrapped up in the city's decision to cut down her favorite tree, while Dunkin begins skipping his meds in order to perform better on the court. The conclusions are both satisfying and provocative. The narration provided by Ryan Gesell and Michael Crouch is excellent. Also exceptional are the author's personal notes at the end about how and why this important story came about and Pat Scales's thought-provoking discussion questions. VERDICT Listeners who enjoyed Jazz Jennings's
KIRKUS REVIEW

Lily is trans and is facing puberty, which will make her look less than herself than she does now, while new kid Dunkin’s manic impulsiveness makes him a misfit; though they click immediately, life gets complicated.

According to her author’s note, Gephart promised her son a story with a character who is bipolar like him and promised herself a story of a trans girl, to help foster understanding of people like them. Gephart clearly has a lot of heart, and she tells their stories with compassion. They speak in alternating first-person narration with cursive headers for Lily and block capitals for Dunkin. Dunkin’s insensitivity during manic episodes doesn’t erase the fact that he’s a good kid, and that comes through. But trans readers will likely not recognize themselves in Lily, even if they share some common ground. Lily is perfectly polite, unfailingly kind, with nary a bad thought, angelic right up to her fairy-tale ending. Though Gephart does a good job of rounding out her other characters, Lily is so pristine that she feels mythical, falling into the pile of fiction’s magical misfits so perfect it’s impossible not to accept this one little departure from the norm. There are too few messy, complicated trans heroes that still find love and acceptance in literature for kids, and while cis readers may find it educational, this isn’t going to change that.

Gephart’s compassion is noble, but it’s not enough to make Lily’s story resonate.

Review of Lily and Dunkin

Reviewed by Jared William Bowers on May 23, 2016

It would be easy to dismiss LILY AND DUNKIN, by Donna Gephart, as being precious and perhaps a bit too on the nose. Or to even peg it as capitalizing on the Social Justice Warrior “Battle of the Week.” Except, much like its contents, there’s nothing easy about this novel, and the prescience behind it’s admittedly timely release is, frankly, bewildering. It would be enough to tackle such a hot button topic, but Gephart chooses to incorporate another, more personal issue into the story - mental illness. In this case, bi-polar disorder. Told from the perspectives of Tim, who is on the verge of manhood but wants to be known as her true self, Lily, and Norbert, who seeks stability and just wants to fit in --- he also wants to be known by any other name (hence, Dunkin) --- LILY AND DUNKIN is a story of acceptance and forgiveness, heartbreak and, in a way, tragedy.

Transgender issues, in one way or another, are currently at the forefront of a growing awareness of social, racial and gender inequalities that we have seen spill into the mainstream over the past several years. While it’s one that has percolated for a good amount of time, it’s only been the last year that we’ve truly seen transgender rights take center state. LILY AND DUNKIN is small in scope --- that’s not to say the emotional and mental stakes are not broad and sprawling, of course --- but manages to utilize its laser focused setting as a means to tackle a significantly, and significant, larger set of problems. The dichotomy of a family on the verge of acceptance, in Lily’s case, is a fascinating and gut-wrenching look at a household divided. While Lily’s mother and sister have come to accept and love Lily for who she is and who she identifies as, her father is continually resistant --- never violently, but with a seething intensity that can be equally as disquieting. For Dunkin, his family’s history with mental illness is the reason for his own battle is the catalyst for his own acceptance.

Both the idea and the actual practice of acceptance are prominent throughout --- and not just externally speaking. Lily and Dunkin each seek acceptance for who they are and have to battle expectations about who others want them to be. But their internal acceptance is something else entirely, and perhaps even more important. Lily is aware, painfully, of who she is. Dunkin, as well, feels a certain weight --- though his comes from the weight of his father’s illness and the uncertainty of moving to a new state. Lily and Dunkin’s chance encounter works in ways that are predictable, but there’s heartache and confusion, misguided attempts to please others before themselves and decisions that ripple outwards in ways that hurt.

At first, pairing someone working through mental health issues with someone dealing with the unknowable struggle of trying to be someone they’re not --- and trying her best to be the person she knows he is --- might have gone terribly wrong. But author Donna Gephart manages to balance both characters well, and the literary conceit of presenting the story as the inner dialogue of each character works to the story’s advantage. Though each of their individual stories are fraught with tension and a sense of despair, there is a sheen of positivity to how things unfold, an almost fairytale-like quality to how the stories resolve. Lily does manage to come across as a bit of a saint, while Dunkin is somewhat of a villain even in his own story. Whether or not that was intentional and part of the story itself --- someone who is aware of their instabilities may actually feel like the villain.

It is easy to understand, though, why Lily is who she is within this particular story. She’s meant to be an avatar, a character through which others can see themselves, or their ideal selves, as they undertake this journey. And that’s LILY AND DUNKIN’s true strength. Gephart acknowledges the adversity but offers hope, speaks truthfully about the pain and the difficulty, but offers the chance for both the reader and the subjects of the story to learn so much along the way. As an educational exercise, LILY AND DUNKIN could be an enlightening, important piece of realistic fiction, especially as we move through such challenging times as a society. As a work of realistic fiction, it’s prescient and provocative without being exploitative. We can only hope that the compassion and understanding found within LILY AND DUNKIN’s pages can manage to spill out into the streets and into the hearts and minds of those who cross it’s path.
Get A Poignant Look At The Transgender Experience In This New Book

Donna Gephart’s *Lily and Dunkin* explores a relationship between a trans girl and a boy dealing with bipolar disorder.

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Two remarkable teens strike a unique friendship in *Lily and Dunkin*, Donna Gephart’s new novel for young readers, and The Huffington Post has an exclusive first look at the cover.

Due out May 3, *Lily and Dunkin* is billed as “a compelling dual narrative” that follows Lily, a transgender girl, and Dunkin, a boy dealing with bipolar disorder. Together, the 13-year-old pals, who meet the summer before they start 8th grade, navigate the trials and tribulations of adolescence.

Gephart, whose novels include *Death by Toilet Paper* and *How to Survive Middle School*, told The Huffington Post that she was inspired to write the book after watching the 2012 short film, “*I Am a Girl!*,” which told the story of a 13-year-old transgender girl named Joppe. Still, the author had a few concerns about how to approach a transgender narrative.

“Because I didn’t have the lived experience of being transgender, I knew I had to do a tremendous amount of research and be deeply respectful,” she told HuffPost in an interview.

Gephart said she based Lily on a number of well-known, young trans women, including Jazz Jennings and Leelah Alcorn, who committed suicide in 2014 after her parents reportedly refused to accept her gender identity. Cultural milestones like the hit series “*Transparent*” and Caitlyn Jenner’s transition may have upped the visibility of the trans community in the past year, but that wasn’t the case when the author initially sat down to write.

“In my first draft, my editor felt I needed to explain how a teen character would have heard the term ‘transgender.’ By my final draft, we deleted that explanation,” she said. “It’s amazing how far we’ve come in such a short time.”

Although she recognizes the “deep emotional underpinnings” of both the trans experience and that of someone with mental illness, Gephart said she wants her readers to appreciate the lighthearted moments of *Lily and Dunkin*, too. She hopes the book will appeal to anyone who’s ever struggled to fit in, and that it “opens a path of understanding, empathy and love so we can continue to create a culture of kindness that includes, rather than excludes.”

Sounds like a must-read to us.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/donna-gephart-lily-and-dunkin_us_568fe502e4b0cad15e647ccc
Lily and Dunkin: Donna Gephart
April 26, 2016

I probably would not have picked up *Lily and Dunkin* if I were not a fan of Donna Gephart's work. Books that overtly tackle sensitive subject make me wary. It's too easy for them to become preachy, or just boring. But Donna Gephart has a real knack for getting at the heart of things, while keeping the characters at the forefront, and adding enough humor. I read the first chapter of *Lily and Dunkin*, and found that I wanted to keep reading. I ended up reading it in one sitting. The ending even made me a bit teary-eyed. And I feel like I now have a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by both transgender and bipolar kids.

So, *Lily and Dunkin* is a dual first-person narrative about a girl named Lily, born into a boy’s body, and a boy named Dunkin, struggling with both bipolar disorder and the absence of his father. Lily (aka Tim) has known since she was very small that she wants to be a girl. Her mother and sister are reasonably supportive, but her father and grandmother are having a much difficult time accepting her wishes. She is bullied at school, despite not having yet come out as transgender. Her best friend is pushing her to be herself (wear dresses to school, etc.), but she (and her father) are afraid of the consequences.

Here's Lily, after her sister shows off some caps she is knitting for premature babies:

"That's cool," I say. But all I can think about is how the whole boy-girl color code is determined right from birth. The moment a baby comes into the world, someone decides whether the baby gets a pink hat or a blue hat, based on the baby's body. Not brain. Why can't they put a neutral color hat on the baby and wait to see what happens?" (Page 73)

Dunkin (aka Norbert) has just moved to Lily's South Florida neighborhood from New Jersey, and isn't sure how he will fit in. He and his mother are living with his fitness-crazed Jewish grandmother, having fallen on hard times. Dunkin speaks of having left his father in New Jersey, with the gradually revealed implication that is father is in a mental health facility. Dunkin takes medication for his own bipolar disorder, but resists seeing a psychiatrist. His up and down moods are revealed masterfully through his first person viewpoint.

Here's Dunkin, on his first day a a new school:

"At lunch, I hold the orange plastic tray in a death grip, wishing again that Phineas were here. Mom wouldn't like it if she knew I were thinking that, but I hate navigating this loud, crowed, foul-smelling cafeteria alone. The good energy of feeling a part of everything in math class has completely evaporated." (Page 90)

Although the narrators for the different sections of the book are not identified, I never had any trouble distinguishing Lily's voice from Tim's. That said, this would make a great dual-narrator audiobook, if you could find someone with the right androgynous voice for Lily.

As in Gephart's *Death by Toilet Paper*, there's a lot going on in the background here. A bit of environmental activism over a favorite tree, coping with the loss of a grandparent, dealing with bullying, changing oneself in order to fit in, bringing a third person into a best friend relationship,
and striving for healthy eating and fitness. There are random acts of quirkiness (decorated plastic flamingos left strategically around the neighborhood), a t-shirt shop that makes chronic and humorous production errors, and a few Yiddish expressions. The mugginess of the Florida setting virtually emanates from the page. But the heart of Lily and Dunkin is the relationships between the various characters, particularly the title characters.

I think that Lily and Dunkin belongs in all libraries that serve upper middle grade and middle school kids. I believe that this book has the potential to open people's eyes about what it's like to be transgender, and also about what it's like to be mentally struggling in some way. The quirky trappings of the book, and the purity of the first-person perspectives, keep Lily and Dunkin from reading like an "issue book". I also appreciated Gephart's soft touch in the resolution of Lily's bullying - there is no magic wand ending that situation, which I think is realistic, but we do gain a bit of insight into the challenges of the primary bully. Highly recommended, and a book that will certainly stay with me.