Penny from Heaven

JENNIFER L. HOLM
THREE-TIME NEWBERRY HONOR-WINNING AUTHOR
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Random House Reader’s Guide 3

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Penny plans to spend the summer of 1953 listening to baseball with her Uncle Dominic and swimming with her cousin Frankie; instead she severely injures her arm and spends six weeks of her summer in the hospital, which helps to heal both herself and her family.

Penny loves her father’s big, noisy Italian family, but since he died, her mother won’t have anything to do with them. Still Penny gets to spend Sundays with her paternal relatives, and she helps her Uncle Nunzio in his grocery store as much as her mother will allow. She and Frankie, her best friend and cousin, always manage to get into mischief, and her favorite Uncle Dominic, who lives in his car and wears house slippers, often listens to the Dodgers with her. All in all, Penny has everything she wants, until her arm is caught in a wringer washing machine, and she almost loses her life.

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Jennifer L. Holm won a Newbery Honor for her first novel, *Our Only May Amelia*, which was inspired by her father’s family stories. She is the author of several other highly praised novels, including the Boston Jane trilogy and the Babymouse series. Holm lives in Maryland with her husband, Jonathan Hamel, their son Will, and a rather large cat named Princess Leia.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING

**Family**—Holm emphasizes the differences between Penny’s Italian family and her mother’s family throughout the story. Identify the characteristics that make the families so different. Why are the traditions of each family equally important to Penny? How do the families show their love to Penny in different ways? How are their expressions of love the same?

**Friendship**—Even though Frankie and Penny are cousins, they are also best friends. What qualities do each of them possess that draws them to one another? Discuss how their differences make their friendship stronger. How do they rely on one another to help them through the rough times? Why is Penny so willing to do what Frankie asks of her, even when she knows she might get in trouble?

**Intergenerational Relationships**—Penny’s relationships with her grandmothers are as different as the grandmothers themselves. What lessons does she learn from Nonny that she can’t learn from Me-me, and vice versa? Why does Uncle Dominic play such an important role in her life?

**Death**—The death of Penny’s father drastically changes the lives of his family members,
in part because of the way he died. How is Uncle Dominic’s life changed by his brother’s death? How does the truth about her father’s death alter its emotional impact on Penny’s life? How is Penny directly influenced by her mother’s loss? On page 233, Penny wants to tell people, “almost dying is awful easy. It’s the living that’s hard.” How has her life reflected this statement?

**Coming-of-Age**—Penny experiences a series of traumatic situations during the summer and her life is altered because of each event. Her dog, Scarlet O’Hara, dies; she almost dies in an accident; she discovers the truth about her father’s death; and her mother begins to date. How is Penny a better person because of her responses to what occurs?

**Forgiveness**—On page 242, Penny says, “It’s my turn finally to give him something he won’t give himself. Forgiveness.” How does Penny give Uncle Dominic forgiveness? What other characters give the gift of forgiveness?