

The Lonely Hearts Club

Author: Elizabeth Eulberg

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Being a teenage girl, as anyone who has ever been one or taken care of one, is rough. Between usual teenager stress such as school and family issues, girls are burdened with the dilemmas of being beautiful and popular. Advertisements for makeup and clothing all market this age group, playing on every single insecurity and highlighting a far-off and often impossible to obtain ideal of what girlhood should be. Would it shock anyone to know that those tense years between 13 and 18 are often the most stressful in a woman's life? Out of all the necessities in growing up, getting a boyfriend and being loved is often high on most girls' lists. Blame the propaganda found in every girl-oriented high school movie from Mean Girls to Clueless: girls are constantly told that they are nothing if they are alone. Elizabeth Eulberg, author of The Lonely Hearts Club, likely became as annoyed as her protagonist Penny Lane at this preoccupation with romance. Her novel is a sweet, semi-cynical examination on the romantic fixations of teenage girls and the plight of being an independent woman in the testosterone-heavy halls of high schools.

Penny Lane is the kind of girl most aspire to be. Independent-minded and free-spirited, Penny is as charismatic as they come. Much like the song her Beatles-crazed parents named after her, nobody can seem to get her out of their head. Every guy, it appears, falls for Penny.

Throughout the novel, not just one but three men attempt to woo her with mixed results. She is certainly in their ears and eyes, but that does not mean they will all respect her. After getting her heart broken once again by her childhood sweetheart, Penny makes a bold claim. She will quit falling in love and the suffering that ensues. When hearing her proclamation to give up high school boys cold turkey, Penny's similarly boy-crazy best friend Tracy is wary. Yet, after attracting the attention over Penny's ex-best friend Diane who has recently emerged from a long-term relationship with the seemingly perfect Ryan, the girls unite for a common cause: The Lonely Hearts Club, named after what other than the Beatles' album Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Soon, girls attending the high school all join in the craze and pledge to be lonely hearts. In doing so, they give up the pressures to please boys and embrace their own individualistic desires and interests outside of romance. Of course, this still being a young adult novel, heroine Penny can only remain alone for so long.

The biggest praise I can give to *The Lonely Hearts Club* is that Eulberg managed to both empower women and enunciate female friendship while also including a surprisingly sincere love story in the midst. Penny Lane engages in a slow-burn romance with her friend Diane's ex-boyfriend Ryan throughout the story. Despite the broken heart she is nursing, she cannot help but fall for the boy who croons her namesake song at a Lonely Hearts Club-sponsored karaoke event. For a book consumed with the idea of a woman being free from men, Penny and her friends spend an abundance of time arguing, complaining, and sighing dreamily about various male students. *Lonely Hearts* skirts nervously around the Bechdel test. While the women at the center of the story often discuss men, they discuss how best to avoid or rise above them. Eulberg is also clumsy with the plot. I found it surprising how quickly Diane managed to gloss over the fact that

her best friend is dating her boyfriend mere months after their breakup. Yet, despite the lighthearted and often distracted plot, the story at heart is charming and shares a vital message to impressionable young female readers. In this sea of YA fiction where girls must sacrifice their entire lives for whatever mysterious fellow stumbles into their arms, *The Lonely Hearts Club* refreshingly spins a new story. You may love “love,” but there is something much more valuable to discover: yourself.

This sweet and empowering novel is ideal for girls 14 and up who are comfortable with a few mild sexual references and referenced underage alcohol usage (not by the protagonist). If

you enjoyed it, check out these reads next:

The DUFF by Kody Keplinger

Anna and the French Kiss by Stephanie Perkins

Along for the Ride by Sarah Dessen

How to be Popular by Meg Cabot