

# **My Mother Was Nuts Study Guide**

## **My Mother Was Nuts by Penny Marshall**

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# Plot Summary

*My Mother Was Nuts*, a memoir by Penny Marshall, tells the story of the comedienne's life and career from her beginnings in New York City all the way to fame and fortune in Hollywood. Penny Marshall was born in the Bronx, New York. She was the youngest of the three children of Tony and Marjorie Marshall. Marjorie was quite content with two children, Garry and Ronny, and was hoping for a miscarriage when she found out she was pregnant with Penny. Later, she told her youngest child that she hadn't really wanted her but she had stubbornly hung on.

Penny's mother was modern before her time. She had no interest in staying home and being the "little homemaker." She wanted to pursue her own career. Marjorie opened the Marjorie Marshall Dance School where she was the chief instructor and choreographer. Of her 360 students, only one was not a big fan and that, unfortunately, was her younger daughter. Tony had his own ambitions. He wanted to be a mogul on Madison Avenue. He eventually opened the Marshall Organization in Manhattan and enjoyed a respectable level of success. Tony's real last name was Masciarelli but he changed it to Marshall so that his ethnicity wouldn't hold him back. He never again told anyone that he was Italian or Catholic.

Starting from her position as an unwanted accident, Penny and her mother had an up and down relationship. One thing that Penny always admired about her mother was her sense of humor, something that she obviously inherited from her. Marjorie liked to entertain and lived vicariously through her young students when they performed - and they performed everywhere - at shipyards, prisons, benefits and even under the bright lights of TV studios. Although Penny wasn't a dancer, she surely got her taste of entertaining from those early days at her mother's shows. Penny never thought of herself as a girl who would do well in Hollywood. She never thought she was pretty or appealing which might have stemmed at least somewhat from the ridicule inflicted upon her from her own mother. For example, she would tell Penny she could open up a Coke with her buck teeth!

But with a "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" approach to life, Penny somehow managed to become an assertive risk-taker who knew she wouldn't be happy with an ordinary life. Her intelligence certainly helped her along in life. In school, she was always in the same room with the smart kids - funny that she thought that the other kids were the smart ones! In school, Penny excelled unless it came to a choice between books and boys. She would always choose the latter.

Penny found a new life in Albuquerque, New Mexico, when she entered the University of Albuquerque. She was most interested in partying and boys and in her third year learned that she was pregnant. She entered into an ill-advised marriage that didn't last very long but she got a beautiful daughter out of that mistake. Hollywood was calling and with her big brother, Garry Marshall, already having success as a screenwriter, she had someone to help her with a budding career. She didn't know what she wanted to do and kind of drifted about for a while in bit parts in movies and TV. During that time she



met and married a son of Hollywood royalty, Ron Reiner. Penny's comedic skills finally came to the notice of directors and producers and after a few years of a directionless existence, she landed one of the starring roles in the hugely successful TV series, "Laverne & Shirley." Her career was going great but her marriage faltered when her successes began to eclipse those of her husband.

Penny left TV land behind for the big screen. Her first huge hit was "Big" which had box office receipts in excess of \$100 million - a first for any female director. She won great critical acclaim and box office success in other films such as "Awakenings" and "In a League of Their Own."

Penny Marshall had to fight sexism in Hollywood and the industry's bias against women with less than perfect looks. However, her biggest battle was when she fell sick and learned the jarring news that she had brain and lung cancer. But just as her mother told her many years before, even though she probably wasn't supposed to survive, Penny Marshall stubbornly hung on!



# Chapters 1 through 4

## Chapters 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 1: Five More Minutes

We can trace much of what happens to us in adulthood to our childhoods. Penny Marshall's mother was nuts, her father boring, her brother funny, her sister girly. All Penny wanted to do was play. She's still like that today. Penny never really wanted to grow up. That sense of childish play taught her a lot about life: "try hard, play by the rules, help your friends, don't get too crazy, and have fun" (pg. 3).

Penny's mother, Marjorie, was the instructor and choreographer of the Marjorie Marshall Dance School. Of all her 360 students, only one was not a fan. Marjorie was critical of her young daughter's dancing abilities and her lack of grace and looks. Marjorie met Tony Masciarelli when they were both in college. He wanted to be a Madison Avenue big shot and to help him achieve that goal he felt it necessary to change his name to Marshall. From that point on he denied being Italian or Catholic. Marjorie thought he would be a good provider. Tony thought she was from a wealthy family. They were both wrong.

After her mother died, Penny learned from some notes she left that her father did not treat her mother well. There were money problems, fights, neglect and abandonment. Marjorie was an independent woman before it was in vogue. He wanted her to stay home and not work. She had no interest in being the little homemaker. At her studio, she taught tap, ballet, jazz and acrobatics. Tony eventually opened his own advertising company, The Marshall Organization. They both worked hard and long hours. She already had two children and was not happy when she learned she was pregnant with Penny. Marjorie bled one night and hoped she was having a miscarriage. Instead she had Penny. She later told her that, "You were a miscarriage, but you were stubborn and held on" (pg. 7). That hurt.

### Chapter 2: What Did'Ya Expect - Hedy Lamarr?

Penny was born in New York on October 15, 1943. Tony must not have thought Penny was a pretty baby since he made up a cartoon with a baby asking her father, "What did ya expect - Hedy Lamarr?" (pg. 9) Hedy Lamarr was a beautiful actress at the time and the inference was obvious. Carole was Penny's first name but she was never called anything but Penny. She didn't know her real first name until she went to school. According to her baby book, Penny smiled a lot, was a loving child and had a strong personality even at a young age.

Penny's grandparents lived with them which made the cramped apartment even more so. Her grandmother was almost blind and ran into things like furniture and toys. She'd blame Penny for leaving her toys scattered about. Penny and her older sister, Ronny,



played piano and her brother, Garry, played the drums. They were the first in their building to have a TV. The kids enjoyed watching "The Long Ranger" and Charlie Chan. The family liked to watch the variety shows. Penny's father kept all the drawings the kid did in school. Her mother didn't keep that junk. Marjorie showed no affection toward her husband. They should have divorced but her mother thought kids from broken homes wound up in jail.

### Chapter 3: The Grand Concourse

Penny's grandmother warned Penny and her friends that she was going to call the super on them when they got too loud outside. They were drowning out her "stories" playing on the radio. Penny's entertainment was watching the knife-sharpening vendor and old clothes merchant pushing their cars around the neighborhood. She'd run inside and get quarters when she heard the ice cream man ringing his bell. She was not close to her brother who was nine years older and was always sick or injured.

Ronny was six years older and once she became a teenager, the age gap seemed even more pronounced.

Ronny taught her how to cross the Great Concourse which was a wide street that was too busy for kids to cross by themselves. Ronny taught her how to get an adult help her cross so she could get to school. Her mother didn't want to wake up early and take her to school herself. But learning to cross the Great Concourse was a right of passage - all the fun things were across that street including a bowling alley, pizza place and shops of all description. Everyone shopped at Alexander's Department store there.

Penny's life in the Bronx taught her not to look at skin color and ethnicity. She was Italian but was in the class with the smart Jewish kids. Each of the Marshall children were confirmed in different Protestant religions and Penny honored High Holy Days with her Catholic friends.

### Chapter 4: Dinnertime

Marjorie was never interested in food. She didn't like to cook and she stood up and ate in the kitchen rather than sit down for dinner. Her father was rarely home for dinner. Marjorie said sarcastically that he had another family in Philadelphia. Tony's family was a mystery to Penny. She only visited his parents' home a few times. Sunday night was family night - the only time Tony would definitely be home for dinner. Entrees usually were some version of pasta. Marjorie accused Ronny of being fat but she wasn't fat. She would tell Penny her buckteeth could open a Coke bottle. She recalled Christmas eves when her father would come home tipsy and lugging in a Christmas tree.



# Chapters 5 through 8

## Chapters 5 through 8 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 5: Strictly Ballroom

Marjorie's ballroom was in the cellar. Class began with singing and then the students would split off to either ballet and acrobatics or jazz and tap. Marjorie would have loved nothing more than if her daughter had become a dancer but Penny hated every minute of the hour long classes. Talk of dance continued at home at the dinner table. There was no getting away from it. The dance studio was Marjorie's life's work. She thought it was good for young girls to perform and hear applause. "Even fat girls" (pg. 27).

Marjorie met June Taylor and convinced her to let her dance class tryout for a gig on "The Jackie Gleason Show" where Taylor was a choreographer. They got the job and appeared on the last episode of the season. The appearance meant more to Marjorie than it did to Penny and the other girls. During the live performance, Penny concentrated on her dance steps and on not throwing up. Marjorie usually made sure there would be food wherever her dancers performed. They appeared on TV shows, at charity events, prisons, shipyards and in telethons. Each venue was a different adventure. At a performance on the Brooklyn shore, the girls got wet from the water splashing over the sea wall. When a piano wasn't available for Marjorie to play at another appearance, she pulled out her kazoo and accompanied the girls while they danced. They appeared on "Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour" three times. They won and went to Madison Square Garden and were the opening act for Pat Boone.

Penny danced with her mother's group through high school but never felt like an entertainer. Her dancing background came in handy years later when she danced on "Laverne & Shirley."

### Chapter 6: Dear Mom & Dad

Penny went to camp every summer. Her letters home had the same message: send candy. Before leaving for camp, Penny would vacation with her family at Avon-by-the-Sea on the Jersey Shore. Penny liked it because it meant no dance school. They rented a house on the beach. Her father would often return home to work. Marjorie enjoyed her life sun bathing and visiting with friends.

Penny and her sister went to Camp Geneva and her brother went to the boy's side of the camp which was called Camp Onibar. Her mother wrote one letter each week, made copies of it and sent a copy to each kid. Penny took advantage of all the sports and activities the camp offered and enjoyed herself. She made great friends like Dede Levy with whom she spent time at camp over the next four summers. Penny was flexible. It was a Jewish camp and she recited the Sabbath prayers every Friday with her Jewish friends.



At thirteen Penny attended Camp Edgemont, a horseback riding camp. Her mother was upset. "It's not kosher!" What did it matter? They weren't Jewish. Back at Camp Geneva the next year, she worked all summer as a waitress where she earned tips. The waitresses' bunk burned down and Marjorie assumed it was Penny's fault because she smoked cigarettes. But another waitress confessed to setting the fire.

When her parents picked her up at camp after summer was over, Marjorie told her that her grandfather had died. Penny was stunned and asked when he died. Marjorie responded that he died at the beginning of summer but she didn't want to tell Penny and ruin her summer.

#### Chapter 7: The Marshall Plan

Garry started at Northwestern University in 1952. He called Penny and Ronny into his room. He felt bad leaving them. He told them that they had no shot with "these people." If something should go wrong, their parents wouldn't be there for them. Two years later, Ronny followed him to Northwestern. After they left, her parents dropped the pretense that they liked each other. Marjorie ridiculed and belittled Tony. Her father wanted to move them to Sutton Place, an affluent neighborhood in Manhattan. But Marjorie wasn't interested. Her life was there in the Bronx. Penny was happy. She had her own room and didn't have to share one with her grandmother any longer. Still Penny wasn't happy and thought of running away to Arizona, for some reason, quite often. She was a typical teen and joined the Elvis Presley fan club. Penny never liked her looks. When asked once, she said her least favorite feature was everything. She always wanted to be prettier.

All of her friends hung out at the Parkway. It was the center of Penny's life. Penny went there every day after school. Dancing was important once again - but not at her mother's studio. She and her friends loved American Bandstand and the dances at school. Penny and her girlfriends were boy crazy, too. She doesn't remember many details but some of those adolescent experiences were captured in her diary which she held on to through the years.

#### Chapter 8: Mucho Grath-e-ath

When Penny came home one day after school when she was fifteen, her mother told her that her parents were getting a divorce. She had to decide who she wanted to live with. What a choice. Her mother was funnier but there was the dance school. Her father was boring but more lenient. But most important to her was not leaving her friends in the Bronx. When she talked to her father, he didn't know anything about it. Marjorie was punishing him for not allowing her dance class to be part of a commercial he was making. They were not divorcing; it was Marjorie's bluffing.

Penny decided she was heading toward juvenile delinquency just as her mother predicted about kids from broken homes. She and some friends shoplifted some items at Alexander's and were caught by the police. They were taken to night court and got probation. Penny attended Walton High School which was an all-girls school. But her





social life was still at Parkway. Her social life got in the way of her possibly going to college. Her grades that had been A's and B's fell to C's and D's. If her choice was boys or books, she picked boys. Her mother called all her boyfriends bums and her mother had something there. Penny never shot very high. Her junior year ended on an upbeat note. A handsome guy, Frank Ryder, took her to the prom.

As a senior she took secretarial courses and Castilian Spanish. She planned to go to college and wanted to go to Ohio State because a boy she liked went there. Her father brought home some information about the University of New Mexico. When she learned that they'd accept anyone from out of state, she decided that the school was for her.



# Chapters 9 through 12

## Chapters 9 through 12 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 9: The Facts of Life

Tony took Penny to Albuquerque. On the advise of her sister, she decided to join a sorority and went through rush week. She had a hard time keeping one of the rules - not speaking to any boys for a week. She adjusted to school easily. She spent spring break in Los Angeles with a friend instead of going home. They spent some time with Garry who was a writer for "The Lucy Show" and Joey Bishop.

Penny dated a football player from Texas. She hung around with black students and was told that the Texas football players didn't like her associating with the blacks. She didn't understand what the problem was and didn't pay any attention to it. Penny had sex for the first time with Chuck Cummings, a star football player. He died in a car accident the next year.

### Chapter 10: Mrs. Henry

Toward the end of his sophomore year, Penny met Mickey Henry who was a freshman on a football scholarship. Their relationship continued into her junior year when she discovered she was pregnant after having had sex only once. She considered getting an abortion in Juarez or trying to miscarry through some rigorous horseback riding.

Mickey wanted to get married when he learned the news. When she called her mother to tell her she was getting married, her mother responded, "You're pregnant" (pg. 60). Although Penny denied it, her mother ignored her. She wouldn't come for the wedding. Penny would need her more when the baby came. Her father was upset and wanted to kick the Indian's teeth out. Mickey was half Irish and half Mexican. They were married in his mother's backyard in a simple and somber ceremony on November 23. The newlyweds spent their honeymoon in a motel watching JFK's funeral.

Back at school, they left their dorms and got an apartment. Since his family were all Jehovah's Witnesses and didn't celebrate holidays, they went to New York for Christmas. Penny took Mickey to his first Broadway show. Tony took him on a tour of the Empire State Building. Back at school, money became an issue so they moved in with his mother. Penny dropped out of school and worked as a temp. Eventually, they had to get their own apartment. She had gained 50 pounds and was preparing for the big event: her mother's arrival.

### Chapter 11: Forget the Gas, I Want the Jell-O

Marjorie arrived on July 4th and Penny was due any day. She started to have contractions but her mother thought she was panicking. Finally, they got so frequent, that Penny decided to go to the hospital. She didn't want her mother delivering the baby.



Besides, the hospital was air-conditioned and it was 100 degrees in Albuquerque. She hadn't dilated enough when examined in the hospital. She was told to walk around and take a shower. She had decided on taking gas to put her under until she was told she couldn't eat before delivery. She told them she'd take the spinal if she could have the Jell-O.

After long hours of labor, she gave birth to her daughter, Tracy. Nursing didn't work so the baby was put on Similac. Penny developed an infection and stayed in the hospital a week. Penny lost half of her weight almost immediately. Mickey was traveling with the football team a lot. At the end of summer, they moved to a larger apartment. She wanted to find work that would allow her to sleep in the morning. Her mother suggested she teach dance. Normally, she would have scoffed at the idea but she took it seriously. She contacted Litka School of Music and was hired on the spot because of her background.

#### Chapter 12: Take Everything

A few months later, Penny had lost all of her baby weight. When Tracy turned one, they visited New York again. That Christmas, Mickey stayed in Albuquerque for Christmas. When Penny returned she found a receipt for flowers he had sent to an old girlfriend. His religion didn't allow him to buy his child a gift but he could buy flowers for an old girlfriend? They argued a lot and Penny realized the marriage was a mistake. Penny was asked to choreograph a few shows for the Albuquerque Light Opera. The director asked Penny if she wanted to audition for the part of Ado Annie in Oklahoma! She agreed and got the part. The reviews were great. Penny and the male lead stole the show.

The next summer, she reprised her role in a theater in the round in Durango. She and Mickey agreed they should end their marriage. They didn't have much and he didn't want anything. Just his name back. She quickly dropped "Henry" as her last name. There was a problem over Tracy. Mickey's mother and grandmother hid her from Penny for a short period because they were afraid Penny would take her to New York. But it all got straightened out thanks to her mother's help - of all people.



# Chapters 13 through 15

## Chapters 13 through 15 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 13: A Work in Progress

After the play run ended in Durango, Penny decided to move to Los Angeles. Two friends were going to Los Angeles so she decided to ride along with them. Garry's career was on the rise. After serving in Korea for two years, Garry had tried his hand at stand-up comedy and writing jokes. In 1961, he moved to Los Angeles to write for Joey Bishop and Johnny Carson which was where he met Jerry Belson who would become his writing partner. They wrote for several high profile successful TV shows including "The Lucy Show" and "The Dick Van Dyke Show." Garry helped Penny get started in show biz.

Penny met Fred Roos an agent who represented Harrison Ford, Teri Garr and Cindy Williams. Garry moved Penny to another apartment and provided her with the name of some contacts. Penny took Harvey Lembeck's improvisational workshop and signed up with an acting coach. She discovered she had the ability to make people laugh with her self-deprecating humor. Her brother warned her that she might not get work until she was older. The young actresses like Sally Field and Karen Valentine were hot and perky and Penny wasn't. Garry got her a bit part on a James Garner movie. She had one line.

### Chapter 14: Thank God My Brother Had a Job

Garry got Penny a part on the "That Girl" sitcom. Penny became a member of the Celanese Players, a group of actors that included Steve Martin. She got other small parts and got a part in a new pilot called, "My Friend Tony." The director wanted her to say her lines without a New York accent which was near impossible. That summer Garry put her in the movie, "The Grasshopper." Penny had to contend with the beautiful Jacqueline Bisset in the movie and the beautiful Farrah Fawcett in a commercial she did. Beauty was everywhere! If Penny would have had an alternate career she would have left. But she stayed and kept getting parts on TV and in movies.

When Garry found out that Penny was going to be in a movie with Jack Klugman he told her to ask him if he'd like to be on a TV series based on Neil Simon's play, "The Odd Couple." She got up her nerve and asked him. She explained that her brother was writing the teleplay and wanted him to play Oscar. As it turned out, Klugman was interested, took the part and played opposite Tony Randall in one of TV's greatest sitcoms.

### Chapter 15: The Manson Murders

Penny changed apartments and roommates quite regularly. Penny and Garry had a huge surprise when their parents decided to move to Los Angeles. They were suffering from financial losses and changes in the old neighborhood. Garry got an apartment for



them and paid their rent. Penny's grandmother came with them but was soon placed in a retirement home in Hollywood. Her father didn't know what to do with himself and went to Garry's office everyday. Penny spent a lot of time with her mother often having lunch with her. Garry's wife, Barbara, would slip money to Marjorie when Tony wasn't around. Marjorie took care of Tracy who was five and spent the summers with Penny. Marjorie complained about her new life because that was her nature. But she actually enjoyed L.A. Her crazy sense of humor was still intact. She wrote Ronny that Penny was taking LSD and planning to jump off a roof and that she knew Charles Manson.



# Chapters 16 through 19

## Chapters 16 through 19 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 16: I Made Him Sick

When Rob Reiner and Penny were kids, they lived across the street from each other in the Bronx. She recalled seeing his father, Carl Reiner, in a store when he was a big star on "Your Show of Shows" TV series. Garry had worked for Carl Reiner on the "Dick Van Dyke Show." One night in Santa Monica, Penny stopped by a local place called "The Committee." She joined a group of people that included Rob Reiner. They were instant friends and began hanging around together. He wanted to be a writer/director. His closest friends were Albert Brooks and Richard Dreyfuss. They were all very fun to be around. She spent time with Rob at his parents' house which was always a good time. Their relationship ended suddenly when Rob had a nervous breakdown and moved home with his parents. He was feeling pressure to succeed and make a name for himself and not be just Carl Reiner's son. He slowly came out of it and Penny began to see him again. Penny continued to get small parts and commercial work. Penny was ready to break it off with Rob because he never seemed to go anywhere. But it was at that point that Rob got more serious.

### Chapter 17: All in the Family

Penny and Rob moved in together. Tony didn't like that they lived together but they had plans to get married. Rob was cast as Archie Bunker's liberal son-in-law on "All in the Family." Penny tried out for the part of Gloria, Bunker's daughter, but Sally Struthers got the part instead. Their wedding took place in his parents' backyard in Beverly Hills. They had 150 guests and had Chinese take-out brought in. They partied into the night. They honeymooned in Hawaii.

"All in the Family" became a big hit and became America's number one TV series. Penny spent a lot of time on set, attending most of the rehearsals and the taping. Garry gave Penny a recurring role on "The Odd Couple." With Penny and Rob both making steady incomes, they bought a house in North Hollywood. After they settled in, Tracy joined them. Mickey moved to Colorado and had another daughter so it was a good time for Tracy to come and live with her mother.

Their house became the hangout for comedy's Hollywood elite. Sometimes the guys would bring girlfriends but most of the time it was all guys and Penny. The only girl other than Penny that they accepted was Louise Lasser mainly because she was married to Woody Allen. One of the guys, Carl Gottlieb, organized the Celanese Players, a group of actors that included Steve Martin and Valerie Curtin. They made more than 150 sixty-second improv-style ads for the Celanese Fiber Company which manufactured knit clothing. Sometime during that period Albert had a breakdown and stayed at the house for a long period.



## Chapter 18: Funny Business

During a break from "All in the Family," Penny and Rob went to New York and took in a sketch comedy show in the village. The cast of unknowns included Chevy Chase, John Belushi and Christopher Guest. Penny and Rob took John and his wife to dinner afterward. A close friendship soon developed between Penny and John. John was just so naturally funny.

The producers didn't want to pay Penny \$100 an episode for her role on "The Odd Couple" so she took Jim Brooks up on an offer to co-star in a new series, "Paul Sand in Friends and Lovers" but it only lasted fifteen weeks and then was canceled. Garry had a smash hit with, "Happy Days."

## Chapter 19: Out with a Laugh

Penny's grandmother died. At the memorial, Penny, Rob and Ronny all got tickled and couldn't stop laughing. But Penny recalled that her grandmother would understand. She always had a good sense of humor.



# Chapters 20 through 23

## Chapters 20 through 23 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 20: Live from New York

Lorne Michaels wanted Rob to guest host on the third episode of his new series, "Saturday Night Live." Lorne asked Penny to appear on the show, too. The rehearsal week was fun and crazy. No one slept the entire week. Rob opened the show as a Vegas lounge singer. One of the last sketches of the night had Rob and Penny playing a couple in an Italian restaurant when Belushi, Dan Aykroyd and others came in all dressed as bees and interrupted them. Rob had creative differences with Lorne about having the bees in the sketch. Penny and Lorne remained life-long friends after her appearance.

### Chapter 21: Ready for Prime Time

An episode that Penny and Cindy Williams had taped for "Happy Days" finally aired. They played two fast girls with Cindy, Shirley Feeney, paired with Richie and Laverne, Laverne DeFazio, paired with Fonzie. Garry pitched the idea of a new series starring the Laverne and Shirley characters to Fred Silverman, the network president, and sold him on it. The show was put on the mid-season schedule and everyone had two months to get the show written and produced. Cindy was hesitant because she wanted to be a movie star. People in the industry thought that once an actor did TV, his dreams of the big screen ended. She was indecisive so they auditioned other actresses but finally Cindy changed her mind. Cindy's boyfriend, Carmine Ragusa, was played by Eddie Mekka. The Laverne character wouldn't have a steady boyfriend. Penny pitched Michael McKean and David Lander as their crazy neighbors. They were first hired as writers and eventually became characters on the show.

The premiere was shown between "Happy Days" and "The Rookies" and guest starred Henry Winkler as Fonzie. Penny woke up the next morning with the number one show in the nation. It was good for her career but bad for her marriage. Her show pushed Rob's show out of the number one spot. It was Penny's idea to put a big "L" on all her sweaters so people knew who was who. The opening chant that the girls did before every show came from Penny's childhood days. Laverne's drink of choice - Pepsi and milk - was also Penny's favorite drink as a child.

### Chapter 22: Chick Fight

In the second season, Penny and Cindy asserted themselves more about their lines and scenes. Penny wound up successfully improvising a lot. If the dialog was weak and not funny and the scenes weren't logical, Penny and Cindy would send them back to the writers. Lander and McKean were the same way. They were banned from the writer's room because they were so critical. From the onset of the series, Cindy always worried





that Penny would get preferential treatment because of Garry. Cindy and her agent would count the lines to see if Penny was getting more. They would also make judgments about whether Penny's lines were funnier. Her agent made the entire nothing-burger into a full blown conspiracy theory. Things came to a head when Cindy reached a breaking point. Writers were fired and production was shut down. Penny was able to smooth things over for the time being. She had no demands except for the rehiring of Lowell Ganz, her favorite writer.

#### Chapter 23: From Suds to Stardom

In November, Penny and Cindy went on a publicity tour. They were just getting used to fame and the star treatment that they got at the Plaza Hotel. They were in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Penny made a sign that said "Happy Thanksgiving Rob and Tracy." Penny found fame to be scary. Farrah Fawcett was petrified how people reacted to her after her sensational poster became a smash hit. Rob and Penny attended a charity tennis tournament in Monte Carlo. When asked if she missed acting, Grace Kelly responded, "What do you think I'm doing now?" (pg. 134)



# Chapters 24 through 27

## Chapters 24 through 27 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 24: Live from New Orleans

Cindy wanted to do Saturday Night Live but Lorne wanted both Cindy and Penny. They had agreed to be on a float in New Orleans for Mardi Gras where Henry Winkler was going to be Bacchus and lead the parade. Lorne decided to do SNL live from New Orleans with Penny, Cindy, Henry and others. Bill Murray had just signed on as a new cast member. Cindy missed rehearsal but showed up for the parade, which was chaotic and disorganized. Cast members were bombarded with beads and doused with drinks. Cindy went missing again and was late for the first segment of their skit but messed it up because she hadn't been to rehearsal. It was twenty years before Penny appeared on SNL again. It took her that long to recover from "live from New Orleans."

### Chapter 25: Where's Mom

Penny knew that Tracy needed more of her attention. She had been neglected by her mother and didn't want to do the same thing to her daughter. She decided to take her daughter back to New York to show Tracy her roots. On an episode on "Laverne & Shirley" entitled "The Second Almost Annual Sholtz Talent Show," both Cindy's and Penny's mothers were cast in the show. Her mother tapped danced and delighted everyone but she couldn't remember her lines. Her mother was subsequently diagnosed with dementia which later came to be known as Alzheimer's disease. She began to forget the names of her kids but she still hated Tony. She could no longer drive and would get lost taking the bus. Soon it was obvious that the end was near. Even though she drove Penny nuts, she'd never forget her.

### Chapter 26: The Remodel

Just before Rob quit "All in the Family" at the end of the 77-78 season, he and Penny bought a house in Encino. It had a tennis court and swimming pool and guest house. The main house had to be renovated so they moved into the guest house. After leaving the show, Rob had a series of failures. It began to bother him that Penny was making more money than he was. Friends didn't come around as much sensing the tension between them. Penny accepted an offer from Steven Spielberg to take a small part in his comedy, "1941," starring Belushi and Aykroyd. On a trip to New York, Lorne introduced Penny to Carrie Fisher. They were friends ever since.

After two years in the guest house, the main house was completed but the marriage was over. They moved in and made a stab at normalcy and had their old friends back over. They made a TV movie together which Rob had written. He was angry when she wasn't as enmeshed in it as he was. Their relationship was coming to an end. Rob talked about moving to Malibu on his own. There was no cheating. They just weren't



happy any longer. They finally split. It was harder on Penny than she had imagined. Carrie helped get her through the worst days. Carrie, who was dating Paul Simon, introduced her to Art Garfunkel who had lost a long-time girlfriend to suicide. They hit it off - misery loves company!

#### Chapter 27: Tripping

In December 1979, Penny attended the premiere of "1941" with Aykroyd and Belushi. She accepted Carrie's invitation for her and Tracy to spend Christmas in Switzerland with her and a group of friends. They skied and took in the beautiful surroundings. The group next went to Paris and stayed at the home of producer Arnon Milchan.

In 1980, Penny received her third and final nomination for a Golden Globe for Best Actress in a TV comedy. She didn't win. She went to the awards ceremony with Steven Spielberg whose marriage was also ending. At an after party, Penny observed party goers doing opium and freebasing. She tried the latter but never touched it again. Her head and chest immediately froze. She felt partially paralyzed.

Penny and Carrie visited Belushi and Aykroyd on the set of "The Blues Brother" in Chicago. It was the first time that Penny and Carrie had ever tried LSD. Everything was funny for a while until Penny experienced an anxiety attack. Later while in New York, Penny and Carrie did more acid. Penny met up with Art Garfunkel and made plans to meet another couple for dinner. Art took a tab of acid, too, and they were never able to find the restaurant where they were supposed to meet. Later when they were alone, Art serenaded Penny with a beautiful rendition of "There's a Place for Us." How could she not fall in love with him?



# Chapters 28 through 31

## Chapters 28 through 31 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 28: Dirty Laundry

After five years, "Laverne & Shirley" wasn't facing cancellation but it needed changes. When the show went on hiatus, Penny and Cindy flew to Cannes for an international TV festival. Their job was to spark interest in the syndication of the show. They were successful, breaking all prior syndication records. Art was inspired by Penny's European trip and suggested they take a motorcycle trip across Europe. Once in Paris, they rented a bike and took back roads through the countryside. They boxed up their dirty underwear and sent it home to a laundry in New York City. From Avignon, they flew home to Boston for the opening of her brother's play, "The Roast." From Boston, they went to Washington, D.C. and met with Carrie and Harrison Ford for the premiere of "The Empire Strikes Back." Next, they all went to London for a royal screening of the movie. Eventually, they returned to Avignon and picked up the motorcycle and continued their tour. Tracy joined them in Geneva, Switzerland. Art had opened Penny's eyes to a new approach to life.

### Chapter 29: Taking Direction

In 1980, Penny became very depressed. She had traveled to New York to see Paul Simon perform at the Palladium. Paul convinced Penny to come on stage with him. It lifted her spirits. For its sixth season, "Laverne and Shirley" got a facelift and the characters moved from Milwaukee to Los Angeles. Penny thought it was a bad move but it turned out okay. Penny directed two episodes that season. Even though Art wasn't around at the time, Penny had gotten the travel bug from him and did a lot of traveling that year.

### Chapter 30: Old Friends

Penny squeezed in some fun before the seventh season began. One important event she took in was the reunion of Simon and Garfunkel in Central Park in New York. In 1982, Penny participated in a charity event called the "Night of 100 Stars" at the Radio City Musical Hall. Penny was concerned when she didn't see John Belushi there. She heard he was bored after finishing his last movie, "The Continental Divide." John wasn't at his best when he was bored. He did everything in excess - especially drugs including cocaine and heroin. Penny was slated to direct "The Joy of Sex." The studio wanted Belushi to star in it. He was going to discuss the movie at a meeting on March 6th but he died on March 5th after having been injected by a speedball [heroin and cocaine]. Penny was devastated by the news, recollecting all the crazy times they had together.

### Chapter 31: Good-bye Shirl



Cindy fell in love with Bill Hudson who had been married to Goldie Hawn. Cindy got pregnant and a few months later she and Bill married. The show was in its eighth season. Cindy wanted an early out on the season and to make only brief appearances as she neared the birth of her baby. She also wanted full pay. Bill made more demands - more pay, a Winnebago trailer, shorter hours - which were not well received. Everything blew up. Lawyers got involved. Bill wouldn't let Penny talk to Cindy. Cindy accused the producers of wanting to get rid of her so Penny could have the whole show. They couldn't come to terms with Cindy, so Penny had to carry the entire show. She wanted double pay and they gave it to her. On the show, Shirley's absence was explained by a note she left saying she'd moved overseas with her husband. But the show had peaked and, after 178 episodes, the show ended.



# Chapters 32 through 35

## Chapters 32 through 35 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 32: In the Event of My Death

Penny was in New York for Christmas when she got a call from Ronny. Their mother had passed away. She recalled three envelopes her mother had left in her desk, one for each of her children. They were all marked with, "in the event of my death." In Penny's letter her mother told her that she knew Penny took her laundry quarters in order to go to the movies. Her disease had been a challenge for the family. The kids bought her and Tony a house and got round-the-clock care for her mother. She had steadily deteriorated and wasn't aware that her kids got together and built a dance theater in her name at Northwestern University.

Marjorie left her body to USC for research. The family had no idea that the possession of the body would return to them after the school was "done" with it. They had her remains cremated and held a small memorial for her. They scattered some of her ashes at the Marjorie Ward Marshall Dance Center and some on Broadway.

### Chapter 33: Peggy Sue Blues

Tracy dropped out of Bennington College and went off to Europe with Francis Ford Coppola's son, Gio. Penny bought a house in Hollywood Hills. Her relationship with Art was on and off. Carrie and Paul got married. Penny sailed up the Nile with them on their honeymoon. Penny visited producer Larry Gordon on the set of "Terms of Endearment." She attended the Academy Awards ceremony with Larry whose movie was up for all the major awards. At an after party, Debra Winger told Penny that her next project was "Peggy Sue Got Married." She suggested that Penny direct it.

Debra convinced the money people to let Penny direct although they never wanted her. Penny began to put a team together and sought the advice of her many show business friends. Out of the blue, she was called in by the executive producers and soon after was fired. The movie was too big for her. Penny was very hurt. On New Year's Eve, Penny partied with Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, Debra Winger and other A-list stars. Her resolution was to get out of town. She went to New York which was just the break she needed. She joined the cast of an off-Broadway play. Penny learned she was pregnant and didn't know who the father was. After talking with her family members and giving it a lot of thought, she decided to terminate the pregnancy. It was something she always regretted.

### Chapter 34: Jumpin' Jack Flash

Penny had a difficult emotional recovery from the abortion. She stayed in New York and bought an apartment there. She ran into Whoopi Goldberg who was starring in "Jumpin' Jack Flash." A short while later, Larry Gordon called Penny and asked her to direct



"Jumpin' Jack Flash." The director had been fired. After reading the script and consulting with her brother, she decided to do it. Whoopi wasn't thrilled to have a new director and one who had never directed before. Penny cast a lot of her friends including Phil Hartman, Tracy Ullman, Michael McKean, Jon Lovitz and her daughter. She knew her friends could improvise and be funny. The production was not a smooth one. Whoopi was cranky all the time. Garry called often to encourage Penny. Her days were twenty hours long sometimes. It finally ended with an uncooperative Whoopi refusing to do the last scene the way it was written. But, it was a wrap!

#### Chapter 35: Keeping Things in Perspective

Penny was surprised how good the first cut of the movie was. She brought in two accomplished editors to put the final polish on it. She needed some pick-ups after the edit was completed and would have to re-shoot some scenes. Penny arranged for Gio Coppola to shoot the scenes. He and Tracy had broken up but were still friends. He agreed but tragically was killed in a boating accident a short time before the shooting was scheduled. Eventually, the scenes were shot and the movie premiered to mixed reviews and earned a mediocre box office. But Penny felt she had been successful. She joined a movie already in production under difficult circumstances and created something she was proud of.



# Chapters 36 through 39

## Chapters 36 through 39 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 36: Getting Street Cred

Jim Brooks dropped by Penny's office on the Fox lot and told her that "Big" was her next movie. He didn't tell her that a lot of directors had already turned it down. She contacted Tom Hanks, Kevin Costner and Dennis Quaid to star in it and they all passed. Sean Penn was too young and Andy Garcia was too Puerto Rican. John Travolta wanted it but he was box office poison at the time. With no lead cast yet, the movie went into production in New York. Penny got Robert De Niro to read it. He liked it. After all his artistic endeavors, he was ready to make a commercial film. Barry Diller didn't want De Niro. He wanted Warren Beatty but he wasn't interested. De Niro found out that the salary they were offering was a pittance compared to what they were paying some actors for other projects. He was out.

### Chapter 37: Heart and Soul

Tom Hanks and Jeff Bridges were now both interested in "Big." It was a nice problem to have! Penny liked them both but decided on Tom. He was finishing up another movie so in the mean time Penny worked on casting the other roles. After shooting began, Tom was young and eager and got into a nice rhythm for the part. The role called for a credible transformation of a little boy to a full-sized man and Tom's acting had to strike the perfect tone. There were a lot of experienced, high-profile people on the set. They were opinionated and strong-willed. It was a collaborative effort but at the end of the day Penny was in charge and she had to assert herself.

Penny was battling a spell of bad health - what she thought was a heavy period. As it turned out, she had had a miscarriage but didn't know she was pregnant and didn't know who the father was. After her doctor cauterized her, she was right back on the set. "Big" was a complicated shooting and Penny learned a lot about movie making from her experience.

There were a lot of ups and downs during the production but finally the shooting wrapped. After editing, Penny watched the cut with her brother, sister and some other trusted friends. Penny scrapped the original jazz inspired score with music that was a better fit. Cuts and edits were made and the movie was screened for audiences after which a few more edits were made. While making "Big," Penny had no other life. It opened and was a huge hit. Eventually, the movie earned upwards of \$100 million. Penny was the first female director to have this huge of a hit. Penny enjoyed its success but most of all enjoyed that the movie made people feel good.

### Chapter 38: A Medical Mystery Tour





Penny was given a documentary about an all-female baseball league that was established in 1943. Penny thought it would be a great feature. She asked her favorite writer Lowell Ganz to write a screenplay based on the documentary. While that was being made, Penny turned her attention to another movie, "Awakenings" based on the story of Dr. Oliver Sacks who used L-dopa to bring people back who had been catatonic for years. Penny offered the role of a recovering catatonic patient to De Niro. Barry Diller was not enthused about the project. In fact, he was so disinterested in it that he let her take it to Columbia pictures to produce it. Penny offered the role of the doctor to Robin Williams who immediately accepted it.

Production was ready to begin on "Awakenings" when Fox green-lit "A League of Their Own." The primary location for "Awakenings" was at the Brooklyn Psychiatric Hospital. The atmosphere was perfect for the shoot. There was a scene with one of the actual patients whom the doctor had brought back from catatonia but unfortunately it had to be cut. Penny wanted to bring as much realism to the film as possible and used real people battling real disease where possible. She used several Tourette Syndrome patients.

Williams and De Niro got along well although they had totally different styles and personalities. Williams entertained the cast and crew with his humor while De Niro was a loner who disappeared to his dressing room on breaks. In one scene when Williams had to hold the violent De Niro down, things got out of control and Williams hit De Niro in the face and broke his nose. Like a trooper, De Niro finished the scene before he sought medical treatment. Penny saw what a great talent De Niro was by the way he handled the parts of the story that presented him with the most challenge.

The first cut was too long and the studio was thrilled that Penny got it down to under two hours. The movie premiered in New York in 1990 to critical acclaim. It eventually received three Academy Award nominations. Even though it was nominated for Best Picture, Penny did not receive a Best Director nomination. Her friends thought it was sexism.

### Chapter 39: Batter Up

Penny was asked to direct "A League of Their Own" by Sony which now owned the property. Penny cast her daughter in one of the roles. She wanted her production team to include Anton Furst who did a great job on "Awakenings." Tragically, he jumped off the roof of Cedars-Sinai and killed himself before production started. Demi Moore was Penny's first choice but she was pregnant. Marisa Tomei wasn't athletic enough for the part. Farrah Fawcett was a little too old. Finally, Penny gave the starring role to Debra Winger. Tom Hanks asked for the male lead. Penny at first thought he was wrong for the part. He was too cute. She told him to gain weight and he'd have the role. Madonna got a featured role which pissed off Debra. She thought hiring Madonna diminished the film and dropped out. Geena Davis, who was a natural athlete and actress, was finally given the lead. Garry had a cameo role as the team owner.

Penny shot the team tryout scenes at Wrigley Field in Chicago. They only had a limited time while the Cubs were playing away. It was a fast few days of shooting. They shot

more scenes in Union, Illinois, and then moved on to Evansville, Indiana where they found a great field to shoot the games. Tom was the right choice for the coach. His timing and delivery were perfect. The movie ends with the girls reuniting forty years later at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. The executive producer didn't like the ending. He wanted the story to end when the characters were young. But Penny stuck to her guns and got the ending she wanted. To Penny, the ending was a tribute to the women who played in the baseball league. The movie was a hit and the box office reached \$100 million.



# Chapters 40 through 43

## Chapters 40 through 43 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 40: Adding Wood

At the end of "League," Tracy announced that she was pregnant and getting married. They didn't know whether to live in LA or New York so Penny bought them an apartment in her building in New York so they could have a home in both cities. Tracy had a boy, Spencer, who weighed in at eleven pounds, seven ounces. A few weeks later Penny celebrated her fiftieth birthday with a group of friends. Tracy's marriage broke up after only a short time. Penny met actor Ron Perleman at a party he was giving for his then wife. Penny and Ron hit it off and began seeing one another.

Penny worked on several projects but they never took off. She was sent the script "Renaissance Man" which was based on a true story about an unemployed single father who worked for the Army and helped recruits who struggled with their classwork. His task was to get them to pass the high school equivalency test. Danny DeVito played the teacher and Mark Wahlberg was signed to play a featured student. Penny had spotted him modeling at a fashion show. She didn't know he was also a rock star. After she met with him that night, he walked away with his first movie role. Mark was a quick learner and a natural improviser.

Penny tested the final cut of "Renaissance Man" in front of audiences. She chose a tough neighborhood in Oakland for one of the first test areas. It received a positive response from the audiences. They laughed in the right places and clapped at the end. Unfortunately, the movie was released at the beginning of summer which was the wrong timing for a small film. It was up against the summer blockbusters and got lost. The movie did not do well.

After returning from a European promotional tour for the movie, Penny received a call from her brother that their father had suffered a major stroke.

### Chapter 41: The Gospel

Penny took over the swanky pool house at Ron Perleman's new estate in the Hamptons. She became very ill there and was taken to the hospital by paramedics. She had stiffness in her left arm and a heart attack was suspected. However, tests were negative and there was no heart attack. She was diagnosed with Prinzmetal's angina. Penny produced "Getting Away with Murder," a comedy with Danny Aykroyd and Jack Lemon. She acquired a spec script called, "Cinderella Man" the true story of James Braddock, a Depression era boxer who went from dock worker to world heavyweight champ. Harvey Weinstein wanted Ben Affleck for the lead. She wanted Russell Crowe for the role. Weinstein wouldn't budge and neither would Penny. She owned the script and it was made ten years later with Russell starring and Ron Howard directing.



Penny was offered "The Preacher's Wife" but had issues with the script. Changes were made but production was delayed because the studio wanted Denzel Washington who was busy making another film. Denzel wanted to play the part of the angel who becomes involved in the life of a preacher who is having financial and family problems. Whitney Houston played the preacher's wife. It was a rough start with Denzel missing rehearsals because of his other commitment but it finally got off. Whitney told Penny up front that she couldn't sing every day. It was too much on her vocal chords. Penny told her she would adhere to the schedule that was best for her. Despite the rumors, Penny had no problem getting along with Whitney. On an Oprah show, Whitney admitted that she was having addiction problems when she made the movie. Whitney had a lot of pressure on her. She was so talented and everyone wanted her. It was Whitney's idea to sing, "I Believe in You and Me" which became a hit.

#### Chapter 42: The Last Bull Run

After doing publicity for the movie and a few TV guest spots, it was the holidays and Penny left for Laos and Cambodia with Janie Wenner, the ex-wife of Rolling Stone founder Jann Wenner. Laos was beautiful but everyone was poor. The little kids had nothing. Penny gave them pencils and pens from her purse. During the days, they toured the capital of Vientiane. They spent New Year's Eve in their hotel room.

Back in Los Angeles, Penny read scripts and took a few roles on TV dramas. Back in New York, Penny attended some of the NBA conference finals. She watched with awe as Michael Jordan put on his usual show. Penny went to Utah where the Chicago Bulls were playing the Utah Jazz. Leo DiCaprio was there and she introduced him to Michael Jordan whom Penny had met back east.

After the season ended, Dennis Rodman was not re-signed by the Bulls but the Lakers were interested in him. Dennis looked and acted strange, but he was a dedicated athlete and worked out harder than anyone. Since Penny knew him, Jerry Buss, the team's owner, asked her to try to recruit Rodman for the Lakers. He only played twenty-three games and then was fired. Penny got season tickets for her efforts.

A few months later, Penny's father died. He was cremated and his ashes were spread in New York, sprinkled from Lorne's office window. David Lander, Squiggy, was diagnosed with MS. He had talked to Cindy who had divorced after ten years of marriage and two children. She was doing a play in Kansas City. After her play, she came for a visit and they had the conversation Penny wished they would have had fifteen years before.

#### Chapter 43: Riding in Cars

Penny received the script for "Riding in Cars with Boys." It was based on a true story of a fifteen-year-old girl who gets pregnant and despite many ups and downs earns a degree and becomes a writer. Penny could relate immediately. She had a dozen young starlets read for the main part and narrowed it down to either Kate Hudson or Marisa Tomei. But the studio president promised it to Drew Barrymore. Penny was furious. Why didn't someone tell her?! Shooting got started in New York. This was the first project in



which Penny didn't feel in control and struggled with having little or no support. But the film got completed and was screened just a couple of times when the 9/11 attacks happened. The premiere was pushed back. Penny wanted the premiere in New York as a symbol of defiance to the terrorists. Lorne agreed to have Drew Barrymore host SNL to publicize the movie. There were some frightening moments when anthrax was discovered at 30 Rock where SNL was shot.

Penny concentrated her time and efforts in New York attending memorials and benefits on behalf of the victims and first responders of the 9/11 attacks. She was seen everywhere in the spirit of going on in the face of a great tragedy. Penny took a break from movie making. The heart-warming dramas that she liked were going out of vogue and being replaced by Indie movies. She directed some TV episodes and made a couple of documentaries. In 2004, Tracy married Matthew Conlan and had a daughter the next year.



# Chapters 44 through 46

## Chapters 44 through 46 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 44: Make It Funny, Honey

Jerry Belson, Garry's long-time writing partner, died from a long battle with cancer in 2006. It was like losing a member of the family. Garry arranged for the memorial and gave a moving eulogy. Penny and others like Albert Brooks, Carl Reiner and Tracey Ullman also honored him as a man and as an artist. The comedy he created would live on.

### Chapter 45: Get Me Some White Castles

Penny and Garry attended an event in Las Vegas. Garry noticed that Penny didn't seem like herself. She didn't feel well. Garry told her to see a doctor. At a football game in New York, Penny had difficulty climbing the stairs. A few days later still not feeling well, friends took her to the ER. After a series of tests, the doctor told her the horrible news. She had lung and brain cancer. While her friends teared up, Penny was strangely calm. All she wanted was for someone to get her some White Castles. She couldn't believe all the people who showed up to support her - even some of the firemen she met after 9/11. She was co-chair of the Brain Injury Association that supported returning soldiers with brain injuries and a benefit was scheduled that night. No matter how much her friends protested, she was set on attending.

Penny was operated on immediately. After waking up in recovery, Penny was disgusted with the incompetence of the staff and the fact that her doctor was going off on vacation. She grabbed a cigarette from her purse but a friend who was visiting stopped her. It was against the rules for a good reason. Right behind her was a row of oxygen tanks that could have exploded. Penny went home and had round-the-clock care. After eight weeks the stitches came out of her head. Back in Los Angeles she was set up on a treatment plan. Penny wasn't ready to die. The surgery, chemo and radiation cleared her brain of cancer. She had a spot of cancer on her lung. The doctors thought the chemo would clear it. After six months, that tumor disappeared. She gained fifty pounds even though most people lose weight during the kind of treatment she had. She dieted with Carrie and gave up cigarettes for a while but went back to them. She knew she should quit and maybe she would after she solved another pressing problem - how to work her DVR.

### Chapter 46: Five More Minutes

A year after the diagnosis, doctors were saying words like remission and cure. Penny didn't know what to do with the rest of her life. She worked on her brother's movie, "New Year's Eve," and read scripts and went to basketball games. She loved being a grandmother to her three grandchildren. Tracy turned out to be a great mother - much

better than she was. At his request, Penny did a documentary about Dennis Rodman's life.

All in all, Penny did better in life than her mother or she herself ever expected. She also learned that if you wait long enough, everything always works out and that "perky" is overrated.



# Characters

## Penny Marshall

Penny Marshall was born in the New York City borough of the Bronx. She lived with her parents, older brother and older sister in an apartment. When her mother's parents moved in, the small apartment was even more cramped. Penny was an unwanted child. When her mother found out she was pregnant with her third child, Penny, she hoped for a miscarriage. But Penny survived and, at a young age, learned to walk across busy streets by herself to find refuge away from her unhappy home. She loved her friends at school and lived for hanging out at her favorite place after school. She was a bright girl and did well in school unless the choice was between books and boys. She'd always choose the latter.

Penny left New York for the University of New Mexico where she chose partying over learning. Pregnant in her junior year, Penny quit school and entered into a hasty and ultimately unhappy marriage. But she had her only child, Tracy, a blessing from the ill-fated relationship. Penny's brother, Garry, was having success as a screenwriter in Hollywood and Penny heard the call of show biz. After drifting from one bit part to another, Penny's comedic skills were recognized and she eventually landed one of the starring roles in "Laverne & Shirley." Her second husband, Rob Reiner, was the star of "All in the Family" at the time. When Penny's success began to eclipse Rob's, their marriage began to deteriorate and they eventually divorced.

Penny made many great friends in her years in Hollywood and she achieved a level of success that she never imagined. She became an A-list director with such huge successes as "Big," "Awakenings" and "A League of Their Own" among others.

Penny was faced with serious illness in her later years. But she wasn't ready to go. All she needed was a few White Castles and the love and support of her friends to see her through.

## Marjorie Marshall

Marjorie Marshall was Penny Marshall's mother. She was a modern woman before her time. She had no interest in staying home and playing the little homemaker. She was always interested in entertaining. She opened the Marjorie Marshall School of Dance and was its chief instructor and choreographer. She had over 300 students one of whom was her daughter, Penny. Marjorie was a marketing phenom of sorts. She secured appearances for her students everywhere imaginable - in shipyards, benefits, prisons and even got them a gig on "The Jackie Gleason Show." Marjorie loved the recitals and lived vicariously through her students. She threatened to divorce Tony when he wouldn't use her dancers in one of his ads.





Marjorie had no great love for her husband, Tony. He spent most of the week away working to make his small advertising company successful. Marjorie told the kids that he had another family in Philadelphia. They guessed she was kidding but they weren't sure. She did have a great sense of humor and was quick with the sharp barb, something her younger daughter obviously inherited. Marjorie wasn't much about proprieties. She ate standing up in the kitchen by herself while she let the kids eat wherever they wanted. She didn't want to be woken in the morning to take Penny to school so her older daughter, Ronny, had to teach Penny how to cross the busy street in front of their apartment building by herself.

After Penny and Garry were both successes in Hollywood, Marjorie and Tony decided to move to Los Angeles. They were down on their luck and having financial problems. The kids took care of their parents and saw that they had a nice house to live in. A highlight for Marjorie had to be when she had a featured role on "Laverne & Shirley." As the years passed, Marjorie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. She deteriorated to the point that she couldn't drive and would get lost taking buses. She wasn't aware that her kids got together and built a dance theater in her name at Northwestern University. Her remains were scattered both at the Dance Center and on Broadway.

## **Tony Marshall**

Tony Marshall was Penny's father. His real last name was Masciarelli but he changed his name to Marshall so that his ethnicity would not present any obstacles to his hopes for a career in advertising.

## **Garry Marshall**

Garry Marshall was Penny's older brother. After graduating from Northwestern University, he went on to become a successful TV and screenwriter and eventually a director and producer.

## **Mickey Henry**

Mickey Henry was Penny's first husband. They met at the University of New Mexico. They got married because Penny was pregnant. The marriage was a mistake and ended in divorce.

## **Rob Reiner**

Rob Reiner was Penny's second husband. When Penny's success began to eclipse his own, their relationship began to deteriorate. After ten years of marriage, they divorced.



## **Tracy**

Tracy was Penny's daughter and only child. Penny cast Tracy in "In a League of Their Own." Tracy was married and had three children. Penny was crazy about her grandchildren.

## **Carrie Fisher**

Carrie Fisher and Penny became best friends. Their relationship endured through the years. Penny spent one Christmas in Switzerland with Carrie and other friends.

## **Art Garfunkel**

Art Garfunkel was Penny's good friend and they shared many good times together. They toured the back roads of Europe on a motorcycle.

## **Cindy Williams**

Cindy Williams played "Shirley" on "Laverne & Shirley." Penny's relationship with Cindy ended on a bad note. They did not speak for fifteen years but finally reunited and smoothed over some of their hurt feelings and misunderstandings.



# Objects/Places

## The Bronx

Penny Marshall was born in the New York borough of the Bronx. She lived there with her parents, older brother and older sister and grandparents until she left for college.

## The Great Concourse

The Great Concourse was the large busy street that Penny had to cross to go to school and to get to all the cool places like the bowling alley, department store, the pizza parlor and her favorite hangout, the Parkway.

## New York City

Even though Penny lived in Los Angeles, she always considered her home to be New York City. She bought an apartment for herself and one for her daughter in New York while they maintained homes in Los Angeles.

## University of New Mexico

After graduating from high school, Penny decided to go to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. She met her first husband at the school.

## Los Angeles

After her first marriage broke up, Penny heard Hollywood calling her. She joined her brother in Hollywood where he was having success as a screenwriter.

## Laverne & Shirley

After getting bit parts in TV and in movies, Penny's comedic talents were recognized and she won one of the leads in the hit TV series, "Laverne & Shirley."

## Big

A number of high profile directors passed on the "Big" screenplay but Penny didn't. She went on to make a huge hit that had a box office of over \$100 million. She was the first female director to achieve that milestone.



## Awakenings

Penny directed Robert De Niro and Robin Williams in "Awakenings." The film was nominated for Best Picture but Penny was snubbed for the Best Director nomination. She and her friends knew it was sexism rearing its ugly head.

## A League of Their Own

"A League of Their Own" was the second \$100 million success for Penny as a director. It starred Geena Davis and Tom Hanks who had the famous line, "There's no crying in baseball."

## Europe

Penny spent a lot of time in Europe. She went on many publicity tours in the various European cities and celebrated Christmas in Switzerland one year with good friend Carrie Fisher. Penny and Art Garfunkel toured the back roads of Europe on a motorcycle.



# Themes

## Abandonment

There are many forms of abandonment and *My Mother Was Nuts* showcases several of them. First and foremost, Penny's own mother bluntly tells her young daughter that she never wanted her, that she had hoped for a miscarriage. A young child hearing that her mother basically wishes that she had never been born has to have lasting confusion and hurt over such a revelation by her mother, the very person who is supposed to love and protect her. Penny's father was not a demonstrative man and was absent from home so often that he did not fulfill his own role as a father on behalf of Penny much less fill the gap left by her mother.

Marjorie Marshall made derisive remarks about her daughter's dancing abilities and appearance. She wished aloud that Penny was graceful like other students. She told Penny that she could open a Coke bottle with her buck teeth. Marjorie refused to walk her young daughter to school because she wanted to sleep in, leaving Penny to rely on the kindness of strangers. Both of Penny's parents abandoned her. Perhaps it made her strong and a survivor but it also hurt and left many scars.

Penny's first marriage was a mistake; however, when she learned he was cheating on her, he had abandoned his commitment to her as a husband. Rather than face his unhappiness and discuss a divorce, he chose to lie and cheat which hurts more. Penny's second marriage to Rob Reiner lasted longer than the first but also ended in divorce. When Rob was riding high as the star of "All in the Family," he seemed to be content with his marriage. However, when Penny's show, "Laverne & Shirley," nudged his show out of first place, their relationship took a hit. After he left his show and had a series of failures, she was earning more money than he was. Rob never cheated on Penny with another woman; however, he allowed his ego to get in between them. He abandoned their relationship when she achieved and succeeded.

Penny felt the sting of abandonment often in her life. No one ever gets used to the feeling but Penny was a strong person and was able to cope with and survive each disappointment.

## Working through Adversity

One of the themes that emerge from *My Mother Was Nuts* is Penny Marshall's strength of character. The author and subject of this memoir emerges as a strong and tenacious individual who let nothing stop her from moving toward a better life. Penny started out with a big challenge. Her mother, Marjorie, really didn't want her from the time she learned she was pregnant. In fact, she hoped for a miscarriage. But, as her mother told her later, although she wasn't wanted, she stubbornly hung on. Penny Marshall maintained the spirit of that first battle, one that she faced even before she was born.



The thought of not being wanted was always part of life for Penny. It was her "normal." Her mother didn't feel like getting up early to walk her to school so her older sister taught little Penny how to find a kind stranger who would walk her across the Great Concourse, the busiest street in the neighborhood. Unknown to the little girl, she avoided two potential dangers: getting hit by a car and asking the wrong "stranger" to help her across.

As an adolescent and young teen, Penny found refuge from her unhappy home at the Parkway which was the favorite after-school hangout for all the kids. And when it came time for college, Penny picked a school as far away from home as possible. When she told her mother that she'd be attending the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, her mother wasn't concerned. Marjorie thought her daughter would be near because she thought all the states that started with "New" were all close together.

Despite the fact that Penny had a bad first marriage, it was worth it because it gave her a beautiful daughter. When Hollywood called, she wasn't sure why they were calling because she never considered herself pretty or alluring. But she found herself there working on movies and commercials with beautiful women who reminded her of her own physical shortcomings. But she persevered. She may not have been attractive by Hollywood standards but she was smart and she was funny. Penny was able to break the rules and emerge as a major TV star through her talent and ambition with a little help from her brother who was a screenwriter.

After she achieved stardom as a comedienne and actress, she entered another field where women - plain or pretty - did not often venture and if they did so, rarely achieved. Even though she was rebuffed and discouraged, Penny knew she had what it took to be a successful director. Thanks to her tenacity and believing in herself the world was gifted with her talents in the form of "Big" and "A League of Their Own" among others. Penny was the first female director to achieve a box office upwards of \$100 million with "Big." She repeated that milestone with "A League of Their Own."

Perhaps starting out in life not being wanted taught Penny that the key to not only surviving but to extraordinary achievement was to hang in there and persevere in the face of great challenge and adversity.

## **Bias and Sexism**

Penny Marshall began life as an unwanted third child. Her mother let her know that in no uncertain terms. Penny was smart and funny but never pretty - or at least she didn't think so. How could she? Her mother told her she could open a Coke bottle with her buck teeth. She surely never thought she'd have a chance in Hollywood, but something propelled her on. But of course in the movie capitol of the world, looks were more important than anywhere else. It was no more obvious than when she had a bit part in the movie, "Grasshopper" which starred the gorgeous Jacqueline Bisset. Behind her back, others on the set commented on Jacqueline's beauty but also said that she couldn't act. But look who was starring in the movie! Around the same time, Penny was



hired to do a shampoo commercial as the girl with the drab hair against the girl with the beautiful hair who was none other than Farrah Fawcett. Penny was tough though and she could take it. . . but it hurt.

Penny's intelligence and grit enabled her to ignore the biases and sexism of the industry and forge on. After having great success in "Laverne & Shirley," Penny broke into a field that not many women, plain or pretty, in Hollywood had ever dared to venture into. She knew a lot about acting and entertaining and knew she trusted her good instincts about what worked and what didn't work on film. She decided she would direct movies. Penny was named director of a struggling film that had lost its original director. Next she was offered a script that no one else wanted. Then she was unceremoniously removed as the director of another movie because it was "too big" for her.

When Penny's movie, "Awakenings" received Academy Award nominations for Best Actor and Best Picture, she was snubbed by not being nominated for Best Director. Her friends all told her it was sexism. She knew it because she'd met bias before. Being ridiculed by one's own mother made all the other biases she encountered in life pale by comparison.

# Style

## Perspective

*My Mother Was Nuts* is a memoir by Penny Marshall who wrote her story in the first person. Penny Marshall is a talented comedienne and infuses a good deal of humor, irony and cynicism into the account of her life and career. Although the title would lead one to believe that the book is a diatribe against Marshall's mother, it isn't that at all. She does relate the ups and downs she had with her mother. But in the end, there was love and caring between them. Penny and her siblings saw to it that their mother was cared for until she passed away after a losing battle with Alzheimer's disease.

A good portion of the book is devoted to her career as an actress, producer and director. She relates her experiences in being an "overnight success" after being cast in one of the leads of a smash TV sitcom. Penny tells of the highs and lows of being a famous and successful star and reveals some of the behind the scenes goings on that will tweak the interest of many readers. Marshall displays deserved pride in her achievements as a director in such blockbusters as "Big" and "A League of Their Own." Her movie "Awakenings" was nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award.

As in any life, there are apexes followed by nadirs. The lowest point in Penny's life was when she fell ill and was diagnosed with cancer of the brain and lung. Through surgery, chemotherapy and radiation she beat the odds and was cleared of the cancer. Her story of the fight for her life was raw and intimate and an inspiration to all.

## Tone

It is no surprise that *My Mother Was Nuts* is written in a tone and style that is rife with humor. There are many funny anecdotes that Penny Marshall shares with her readers and she uses her own brilliant sense of humor to get her points across. She had an up and down relationship with her mother who had a biting wit and was always ready with the sharp comeback. Obviously, daughter learned from mother.

A sense of patience and tolerance comes through in Marshall's writing. Although she was the youngest child, she intuited that she needed to ignore her mother's harsh treatment of her. It was as if she knew deep down that her mother couldn't help it, that in a sense she was out of control. And though Penny didn't have the traditional relationship with her mother, she loved her mother and cared for her in spite of flaws and shortcomings. Somehow Penny knew at a young age that she had to understand her mother and often give her a pass. It was almost a role reversal. In many instances, Penny became the parent to Marjorie's child.

Despite hurt feelings that never completely healed with time, a tenderness and poignancy comes across in Penny's words even when it sounds like she's complaining



about her mother. She gave her mother the ultimate excuse by saying, "My mother was nuts!"

## Structure

*My Mother Was Nuts* by Penny Marshall is a memoir by the actress/comedienne. The book tells the story of Penny's life from her beginnings in the Bronx, New York City, to her huge successes in Hollywood and lastly to a battle for her very life. The story is told in a mostly chronological order with frequent references or flashbacks to prior or future times. However, the story generally remains in a forward motion and is not overly bogged down by detours from the main story.

Penny Marshall's memoir is separated into forty-six mainly brief chapters. Throughout the book there are interspersed many photos from every stage of Penny's life - from her childhood all the way to Hollywood and back again to her hometown of New York City. Her introduction is simple and shows where her heart is. The funny lady is a family lady. She dedicates the book to her parents, sister, brother, daughter and her three grandchildren.

In an "Acknowledgments" section that follows the book, she thanks her brother and sister and her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren for giving her pleasure while having to put up with her. She also describes the importance of great friends in her life including long-time best friends Carrie Fisher and Art Garfunkel. Penny writes of her gratitude to her loyal assistants and many others who supported her through the ups and downs of her life and career. And finally, Penny thanks the doctors who helped her "dodge the bullet."



## Quotes

"My mother was nuts. My father was boring. My older brother was funny. My older sister was girly. And I just wanted to play." (Chapter 1, page 2)

"Mom doesn't understand much about life beyond her ballroom and who knows where Dad is most of the time. Nanny's walking into walls, and Grandpa is living across the hall." (Chapter 7, page 40)

"It helped that my brother had an important job in the business. He made it clear that he wouldn't risk his career for me, but he would open doors. It would be up to me to get through them." (Chapter 14, page 82)

"I had a simple rule for navigating Hollywood's confusing roads: Stick with the most talented people you know. I was lucky. I knew a lot of them." (Chapter 19, page 108)

"I grew sentimental about her life and the life she had given all of us, including me, the accident, the bad seed." (Chapter 32, page 192)

"Roses are red, violets are blue, wish you were here, glad you are not!" ~ Jonathan Melvoin and Jim Belushi (Chapter 33, page 194)

"I was the one person who always said I hadn't had an abortion, and then I was one of those people. It's the one thing I've regretted most. It fit that difficult time of my life. I guess everyone goes through a blue period. This was mine." (Chapter 33, page 201)

"Movies bring together dozens of strong-willed people with a sense of how they want to make the film and every day is a collaborative effort. But at the end of the day, only one person is in charge, and that was me." (Chapter 37, page 223)

"There's no crying in baseball." (Chapter 39, page 255)

"Then we arrived in Laos, a country of immense beauty and extreme poverty. The people were sweet. The children we saw had nothing. I gave them everything I could down to the pencils and pens in my bag." (Chapter 42, page 283)

"And as a New Yorker myself, I thought it was important to show the terrorists and the world that the United States was not going to be intimidated and New York City was not going to be stopped." (Chapter 43, page 294)

"I thought being rag monitor in eleventh grade was pretty good, so I guess I surpassed expectations." (Chapter 46, page 320)



## Topics for Discussion

How was Penny Marshall treated by her mother and father? How did it help her? Hurt her?

How was Penny able to overcome some of the negativity that she endured as a child?

What broke up Penny's first marriage? Why did her marriage to Rob Reiner end?

What problems did Penny Marshall face in Hollywood as she tried to advance in show business? How was being a female an issue for her?

In what ways did Penny's sense of humor see her through?

What is nepotism and how did it impact Penny's career? Would she have had the same career without it?

What did Penny achieve as a director that no other female director had ever achieved before? What hit movies did Penny direct?