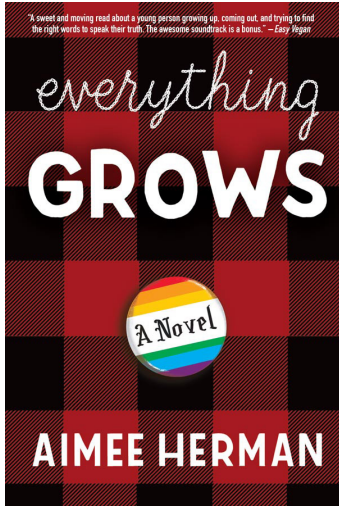


# EVERYTHING GROWS

by Aimee Herman



## ABOUT THE BOOK

Fifteen-year-old Eleanor Fromme just chopped off all of her hair. How else should she cope after hearing that her bully, James, has taken his own life? When Eleanor's English teacher suggests students write a letter to a person who would never read it to get their feelings out, Eleanor chooses James. With each letter she writes, Eleanor discovers more about herself, even while trying to make sense of his death. And, with the help of a unique cast of characters, Eleanor not only learns what it means to be inside a body that does not quite match what she feels on the inside, but also comes to terms with her own mother's mental illness.

Told through a series of letters and set against a 1993-era backdrop of grunge rock and riot grrrl bands, *Everything Grows* depicts Eleanor's extraordinary journey to solve the mystery within her and feel complete. Along the way, she loses and gains friends, rebuilds relationships with her family, and develops a system of support to help figure out the language of her queer identity. Through author Aimee Herman's exceptional storytelling, *Everything Grows* reveals the value of finding community or creating it when it falls apart, while exploring the importance of forgiveness, acceptance, and learning how to survive on your own terms.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The knowledge of James's death becomes a catalyst for Eleanor to begin breaking through the doors of who she is. Why might Eleanor choose James to write letters to? What does she gain from this decision?
2. *Everything Grows* explores the complexity of forgiveness. Writing these letters to James was an opportunity for Eleanor to not only work toward understanding herself better but move toward empathy and acceptance of James's behavior toward her. Part of this included Eleanor creating a mix tape for James, listing songs she thought he might like. If you were to create a mix tape for someone in your life (past/present) you might want to forgive, what songs would be on your list?



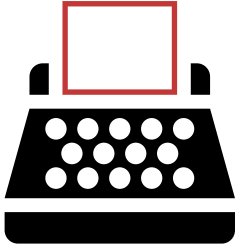
## READING GROUP GUIDE *continued*

3. As one friendship ends for Eleanor, a new one begins through Aggie. How does Aggie's reaction to Eleanor's coming out differ from Dara?
4. How does Eleanor's feelings toward her mom change toward the end of the novel? How do we see forgiveness?
5. In what ways does Eleanor become a salve, of sorts, for Helaine as she mourns the death of her son?
6. After Eleanor comes out, Flor informs her of important LGBTQ writers and books to read. If you were to create a book list which encapsulates your identity or history, what would be on your top ten?
7. Reigh says to Eleanor, "My gender is not just an article of clothing. It's in me. Sometimes the people around us are wrong. And it takes some time to make our own realizations." We are often told by others who/ what we are way before we have the vocabulary to decide for ourselves. Write/talk about a time when you made a conscious decision to welcome in a part of yourself that had been dormant or hidden.
8. T'nea and Reigh recognize something in Eleanor even she is not quite ready to articulate. How are these characters a bridge toward Eleanor learning more about who she is?
9. *Everything Grows* begins with a quote from Zora Neale Hurston, "There are years that ask questions and there are years that answer." How might this relate to each character in the book?
10. At the start of the school year, Ms. Raimondo asks the students to write a love letter to themselves. She tells them that when she thinks they have forgotten about it, she will mail it back to them. Open up your notebook or grab a piece of empty paper lying around. Write yourself a love letter. Put it in an envelope and seal it. Make a note on your calendar: In six months, open up your love letter and digest.

### ABOUT AUTHOR AIMEE HERMAN

Aimee Herman is a two-time Pushcart Prize-nominated novelist, poet, and performance artist based in Brooklyn, looking to disembowel the architecture of gender and what it means to queer the body. Aimee is the author of two poetry collections, *to go without blinking* (BlazeVOX books) and *meant to wake up feeling* (great weather for MEDIA). Her work has been widely published in the U.S. and internationally in literary journals including *Lavender Review*, *EDUCE*, *Sous Les Pave*, and the Lambda Award-winning anthology *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics* (Nightboat Books). Aimee currently teaches at Bronx Community College. She sings and plays ukelele in the poetryband Hydrogen Junkbox.

To inquire about having  
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in with your book group,  
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## THE MAKING OF EVERYTHING GROWS

by Aimee Herman

When I was twelve, my mother tried to commit suicide. It became the benchmark of my existence. The before and after. A few years later, I tried to kill myself and spent the next years of my life in and out of hospitals trying to find a way out. Growing up, I was always searching for some sort of map, a directional guide to understand myself. This searching led to drugs and a lot of poor decisions. Rehab at nineteen, two relapses after that, and I am still trying to learn how to find my wild without risking my life. When I started writing this novel, I birthed a character that I wished I could be when I was that age: strong, articulate, bold. Eleanor embraces life, even when it is dark and unkind. She risks friendships to be herself. It took me a long time to even get close, and I am still getting there.

I was having breakfast with my dad last week and he asked me when I knew I was gay. I told him that I didn't have an age when I knew because there was so much trauma in our house that I wasn't thinking about my sexual orientation. But in 1997, when Ellen came out on the cover of TIME magazine, something shifted in me. I became obsessed with this news. I couldn't believe it. Friends asked me why I cared so much. I couldn't yet articulate why, but it mattered. Back then, we didn't have shows like Will & Grace. Celebrities didn't openly come out. There wasn't LGBTQ literature like there is now. It took me awhile to find my vocabulary and I am still searching for it.

There is a bit of me in every character and as I have been writing and rewriting this story, it has changed as I've changed. James is very loosely based on a boy in my high school who committed suicide when I was a senior. I barely knew him. I don't think we ever spoke to each other, but I remember being in Saturday detention and hearing boys behind me talk about it. I went home, ran up to my bedroom and cut all my hair off. Back then, I didn't understand why I was so upset. Years of therapy and living helped me to realize I was jealous. He succeeded at what I was trying to do for years.

Over the years, my own mental illness has fluctuated. I marvel at the ways in which we speak about mental illness now. When I was in high school, people made fun of me. I remember one boy making fun of my scars, saying he wished I could just kill myself already. There was no sensitivity about it or "safe spaces" or trigger warnings or any of that political correctness as there is today. Now, every poetry reading I go to, someone openly talks about their mental illness. I am amazed at how far we have come with our ability to destigmatize this. But there is also a part of me that feels sad that I didn't get to experience that when I needed it. It took me a very long time to only speak about my traumas, what I have done to myself, what has been done to me. Part of writing this book, was to create lives who are hurting, but surviving.

**EVERYTHING GROWS** by Aimee Herman

## **READING GROUP GUIDE** *continued*

Eleanor, even amidst the trauma of her mom trying to kill herself, is strong. She is troubled by the language of herself, but meeting Aggie and Reigh and even Flor help her to realize the capacity of her strengths.

It would not have been safe for me to come out in high school. Now, there is more support. I wrote this book in a tiny shared apartment in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn during a time when I had relapsed and writing was the only thing I had that kept me alive. I wrote this book in Boulder, Colorado while I was falling in love with a beautiful Canadian that taught me how to cut mangoes and eat kale and be wild (without hurting myself). I wrote this in Denver, Colorado where I learned how to be a teacher. I wrote this in Marquette, Nebraska in a tiny town of less than 300 during a writing residency during a deep summer heat. I wrote this in two different apartments in Brooklyn (Crown Heights and Bed Stuy) during a break-up, then a mental breakdown and then finding love once again.

This book has probably been inside me since Eleanor's age, but I started writing it in 2006, very on-and-off. It has taken many shapes and Eleanor has shifted quite a bit. Initially, Shirley (Eleanor's mom) was extremely dark and not approachable at all. I needed to get past some of my own hurt and anger toward my mother in order to humanize Shirley. When I rewrote this for the last (I hope) time, I started to recognize some of my own forgiveness toward my mom through Eleanor.

I needed to take this long to complete this novel. It needed this much time to breathe and fully gather its blood and guts.



Aimee Herman  
author  
*Everything Grows*

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