



# NIRVANA IS HERE

## by Aaron Hamburger



### ABOUT THE BOOK

For Ari Silverman, the past has never really passed. After 20 years, the trauma from a childhood assault resurfaces as he grapples with the fate of his ex-husband, a colleague accused of sexually harassing a student. To gain perspective, Ari arranges to reconnect with his high school crush, Justin Jackson, a bold step which forces him to reflect on their relationship in the segregated suburbs of Detroit during the 1990s and the secrets they still share.

An honest story about recovery and coping with both past and present, framed by the meteoric rise and fall of the band Nirvana and the wide-reaching scope of the #metoo movement, *Nirvana is Here* explores issues of identity, race, sex, and family with both poignancy and unexpected humor. Deftly told intertwining stories with rich, real characters are reminiscent of the sensuality and haunting nostalgia of André Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name* blended with the raw emotion of Kurt Cobain's lyrics. Written by award-winning writer Aaron Hamburger, *Nirvana Is Here* is "a wonder of a book," according to acclaimed novelist Lauren Grodstein (*Our Short History*). "As a Jewish Gen-Xer, the novel reminded me exactly of who I once was—and all that I still want to be. . . . a brilliant accomplishment."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the book's opening, we meet Ari as a man approaching middle age who's haunted by his past. What details of his life suggested that Ari is a man who hasn't let go of his youth? Given that, why do you think he's so reluctant to reach out to Justin? What do you think he's hoping for by reconnecting with him?
2. What's the role of social media and technology in the novel? How does it connect to the themes of human connection? How do you deal with social media in your life? Is it something you find harmful, helpful, or a bit of both?
3. As readers, we get to know Ari's story slowly, piece by piece, putting it together like clues in a mystery. Why do you think the author laid out his story this way? What effect did it have on you as a reader?



## READING GROUP GUIDE continued

4. Ari's voice as an adult is in the third person present tense, while his voice in the past is in first person past tense. How did you experience the shift in the voices, and how did these differences help create different impressions of the same character at different stages of his life?
5. The novel takes on themes of sexual abuse in both the past and present narratives. In the past narrative, Ari's abuser Mark, ultimately asks for forgiveness. How did you feel about his request? Can we be forgiven for things we've done wrong in our youth? In the present narrative, Ari's husband M is accused of sexual misconduct. If you had to judge his behavior, where would you come down on it? Where should we draw the line on sexual misconduct today, especially given the #metoo movement?
6. How do you interpret the book's title, which refers to both the band Nirvana, and the spiritual state known as "nirvana"?
7. If this book were written from Justin's point of view, how might it be different? Were you surprised by how his life turned out after high school?
8. Why do you think Ari's parents reacted so differently when he came out to them?
9. Ari is inspired by the band Nirvana and its lead singer Kurt Cobain to overcome the trauma he experienced. Were you ever a passionate fan of a singer or a band? What effect did they have on your life?
10. Have you ever reconnected with a significant person from your past after a lapse of time? How did it go? What surprised you, disappointed you, or encouraged you about these encounters?
11. What do you think Ari's future will look like after the events of this book?

To inquire about having  
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in with your book group,  
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### ABOUT AUTHOR AARON HAMBURGER

Aaron Hamburger is the author of the story collection *The View from Stalin's Head* (Rome Prize, the American Academy of Arts and Letters), the novel *Faith for Beginners* (a Lambda Literary Award nominee), and *Nirvana Is Here*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Crazyhorse*, *Tin House*, *Subtropics*, *Poets & Writers*, *Boulevard*, and *O, the Oprah Magazine*. He has received a fellowship from the Edward F. Albee Foundation and residencies from Yaddo and Djerassi. He has taught writing at Columbia University, the George Washington University, and the Stonecoast MFA Program.



## THE MAKING OF NIRVANA IS HERE

by Aaron Hamburger

**NIRVANA IS HERE** is the story I've been writing or trying to write my entire life.

Like the protagonist of the book, I grew up in the segregated suburbs of Detroit, though in the 1980s, not the 1990s, and like the protagonist, I felt very much like an outsider. I remember vividly being a freshman in college in the fall of 1991, sitting on the floor of a friend's dorm room, when another student came running in, saying, "You have to hear this song" and putting on "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana. The song felt so different from anything I'd heard before, and it felt in a way like a kind of permission to be who I was, to claim an identity I'd been running away from for so long in my life.

When I was twelve, I was sexually assaulted by another boy my age, a neighborhood bully who threatened to kill me if I told anyone what he'd done. His threat notwithstanding, I did tell my therapist, who was legally obligated to tell the police. I remember vividly sitting in the police station and being asked if I "wanted it," which was my assailant's defense for what he'd done. Because I said no, both to that boy and the police,

I was safe. This led me to the wrongheaded conclusion that if I admitted to anyone that I was attracted to other guys, he would be found innocent and I would be found guilty, and my assailant would be set free and could come find me and exact his revenge.

All this is the background material that inspired the fictionalized version of the story of this book. It's material that for many years, even as an adult, I felt that I had to keep hidden, that somehow others would feel repelled if they knew the truth. In my earlier fiction, I've written semi-autobiographical stories, but always with this key fact of my own life erased or shunted off to the side. This book is the first time I've attempted to grapple with this subject matter head-on, and it's been liberating. Suddenly, I feel as though my fiction has taken on a new sense of vitality and honesty that's liberated me to tell all kinds of stories, not just my own.

I recently wrote an autobiographical essay about this time in my life, which appeared in *Tin House* magazine, called "Sweetness Mattered." In the piece, I describe my sexual assault and then how at a new school, I met another boy I liked, to whom I was afraid to confess my true feelings, feeling that at the time, I didn't fully understand. I found out that he liked a certain kind of candy, and I began bringing him a piece of that candy every day to school—for three years. The gesture felt therapeutic. Even though nothing romantic ever resulted, our budding friendship had a curative effect on me, made me feel as if I weren't the image of myself that the boy who'd assaulted me wanted me to believe.

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

When the essay came out, I was shocked by the overwhelming response to it. I had no idea that this part of myself that I'd kept hidden was exactly what people were interested in knowing about me.

Perhaps the strangest part of this whole experience has been that though many of these events are very much in the past in terms of time, in terms of psychic effect they have stayed with me and to a certain extent shaped me. For that reason, I've written this story as a braided narrative, with the past story framed by the present, just as fragments of my past have stayed on my mind in my own present life.

As I said earlier, I feel as though I've been writing this book in some form or another my entire life, but it wasn't until the past few years that it occurred to me to shape this material into a single, coherent story, in the form of a novel. Recent political and cultural events regarding the #metoo movement post-dated much of the generative writing process, but as I was completing this book, knowing that other people in my situation were telling their stories gave me courage and inspired me to bring my book across the finish line. In fact, I read several survivor's stories and psychology books dealing with these issues, and I was shocked by the sense of recognition I experienced as I read all these accounts.



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Aaron Hamburger, author, *Nirvana Is Here*