



READING GROUP GUIDE

THE BOY WITH A BIRD

IN HIS CHEST

Introduction

Owen Tanner has never met anyone else who has a chatty bird in their chest, but medical forums would call him a Terror. From the moment Gail emerged between Owen's ribs, his mother knew that she had to keep her child away from the world. After a decade spent in hiding, Owen takes a brazen trip outdoors in the middle of a forest fire, and his life is upended forever.

Owen is forced to flee the home that had once felt so confining and hide in plain sight with his uncle and cousin in Washington. There, he feels the joy of discovering music that cracks him open, of finding his chosen family, of sharing the bird in his chest with his best friend and having them embrace him fully; of falling in love and feeling the devastating heartbreak of rejection before finding a spark of happiness in the most unexpected place; of living his truth regardless of how hard the thieves of joy may try to tear him down. But the threat of the Army of Acronyms is a constant, looming presence, making Owen wonder if he'll ever find a way out of the cycle of fear.

The Boy with a Bird in His Chest
Emme Lund



*This reading group guide for **The Boy with a Bird in His Chest** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Emme Lund**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*





Topics and Questions for Discussion



1. In chapter 4, Owen and his mother watch *The Little Mermaid*. Why was this momentous for Owen? What about his mother? How did the movie affect her?
2. “He felt like a ghost, haunting her by picking up after her” (page 23). Why was Owen his mother’s ghost?
3. “Most of them say you developed a bird in your chest because your dad left shortly after I became pregnant with you, that you were cursed because I had you out of wedlock. The nice ones say you have a bird in your chest because you don’t have a strong male figure, that you developed her to take on the role of father” (page 28). While Terrors are fictional, similar statements are often used to judge people in the real world. In what circumstances do you find people invoking the above sentiments?
4. “[Owen] let the music into his skull, felt it sink under his skin and wiggle his muscles” until it “cracked Owen open” (pages 83). How does this foreshadow Owen’s eventual relationship to music and what it allows him to feel?
5. After Tennessee comes out to Owen and he gets pummeled by Troy, he shares his own secret of Gail with her (chapter 28). He, however, chooses to hide the fact that “Gail could talk and that she whispered up to him all day long. He didn’t tell her about feeling the air and knowing how others felt instantly. He didn’t talk about July. He never said *Terror*. He remained mum on others like him and the Army of Acronyms” (pages 107–108). Why does Owen choose to keep certain things secret? Keep note of when he chooses to reveal each secret and to whom, and discuss the significance behind each reveal.
6. Tennessee tells Owen, “If you glow bright and stick yourself out there, then people figure there isn’t much left of you to hide and so they leave you alone a little bit,” (page 111). Do you think this is true? Is it good advice? Why or why not?
7. On page 117, after dressing up as Ariel and wearing makeup, he “pass[es] the sensation of never feeling at home until now” to Gail. Why do you think this was Owen’s first time feeling at home?
8. In looking at Owen’s relationships with his friends and acquaintances, he experiences different and dynamic levels of emotional connection and physically intimate experiences, for example, his encounters with Ava (in chapter 31) and Comet (in chapter 45) and beyond. How does this represent the fundamental uniqueness of queer interpersonal relationships wherein people are often friends with people of a gender they are attracted to and where expressions of community and intimacy challenge long-standing norms?
9. Owen draws a distinction between the “right kind of attention” (such as attention from a romantic partner) and the “wrong kind of attention” (such as shooting, or even carrying a rifle). What is the difference between the two? Why does this matter to Owen specifically?

10. “Everyone disappears eventually” (page 264). What does disappearance represent to Owen, both in terms of loss and freedom, pain and hope?

11. When Owen happens to run into Clyde on a horse in the woods after receiving an alarming letter from his mother, he is moved by Clyde’s simple action of “put[ting] a hand to his horse’s side” to comfort it when they are in the presence of a doe (page 125). Why do you think this memory stays with Owen and draws him further to Clyde?

12. “It was only himself and the kernel of desire lodged between his thighs” (page 76). Owen’s first time masturbating is a joyous and transformative experience. Later, it’s described: “every time he came, he left bits of himself places, then he also felt a little bit of the place inside himself” (page 80). Then a while later, after his increased feelings of loneliness when Tennessee leaves and he is rejected by Comet, masturbating brings him feelings of “shame” (page 137). Think about what Owen imagines when he masturbates and how he feels, and how those things progress over time. What, if anything, does that tell us about his experiences, both past and present?

13. “We all suffer . . . Queers, Black folks, women. We just suffer in different ways and to different depths” (page 175). Tennessee says this to Owen after Comet repeatedly defends his stance that a white woman cannot be excused from wearing dreadlocks just because she experiences oppression as a woman. Owen, perhaps due to his general lack of exposure from having been secluded most of his life, does not seem to have a strong grasp on intersectionality. Read this article and discuss how Comet’s experience and oppression as a Black individual is different from that of the white queer characters in this story. Then compare this to Owen’s experience as a Terror. Is it oppression? Why or why not?

14. “The conversation stuck in his chest. He wanted to yell that he was on the same side as them, his friends, but he couldn’t, and so he listened” (page 175). Now reflect on a time you were in a position where you wanted to say the right thing but didn’t know what it was.

15. In chapter 14, his first night without his mother, Owen thinks of himself as “an old-growth tree . . . decomposing” and eventually turning into “bug food,” a thought that soothes him (page 57). Compare this to page 160 where despite his depression, Owen is “pleased he still worried for his life.” What is Owen’s attitude and relationship with death? How does it evolve?

16. “He ignored it. He learned that if he let every single feeling pass him by, if he let it all roll by like water off a duck’s back, then he could avoid feeling hurt . . . numbness > sadness” (page 184). After plenty of loss and trauma, why does the night of Owen’s encounter with Comet finally drive him to this point? Is this a choice that we can make or have to make?

17. “I’m not great at being a man” (page 194). What does being a man mean to Owen? How has he described men and masculinity so far? Think of characters outside of his inner circle as well (refer to chapters 9 and 25). Does he fit that description? Why or why not?

18. Owen places emphasis on Tennessee’s attitudes towards people—for example, he remembers that Clyde is “not our people” and believes that liking Natalie is a “betrayal” to Tennessee. Describe how Owen interacts with these nuanced and possibly contradictory ideas and whether he embraces or rejects duality.

19. On page 278, when Clyde visits Owen in the hospital, he says “you are not dreaming.” Why is the word dreaming particularly meaningful given Owen’s history of daymares? What does Clyde and his acceptance represent to Owen?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Owen seems to have different kinds of connections with the elements: he is drawn to the ocean and water; in moments of anxiety, he imagines himself as a tree with roots; he finds comfort being near smoke and fire. Yet he struggles with air and often can't breathe without Gail or his inhaler. Discuss the role of nature in all its forms as it appears in this story, starting with the obvious (a bird in his chest). Try to come up with as many examples as possible and the ways in which they help tell the story of Owen and the other characters.



2. Owen's mother repeatedly warns him of the Army of Acronyms. In chapter 5, she calls them a system that removes children from parents. "Doctors are a strong arm of the Army of Acronyms... And cops, too. Cops are worse than doctors" (page 15). Outline the hierarchy of this society in the book wherein people in positions of "public service" (doctors and cops) are a threat. Whom are they specifically a threat to? Do they parallel any powerful institutions in the real world?

3. What is Gail to Owen? What is Owen to Gail? Their relationship is inevitably codependent and simple in that one cannot live without the other. When he sleeps, she watches over his lungs. Yet that is only a small part of their deep, unbreakable connection, which is as emotional as it is physical. What are the ranges of emotions that Gail and Owen bring out of one another? How do they support each other? How do they hurt each other? Do you have your own Gail? Is it another person or does she exist within you?



A Conversation with Emme Lund

Q: What inspired the concept of a boy with a literal bird in his chest?

A: It's a funny thing, the ways ideas come to me when I'm writing. It's a lot of trial and error. When I sit down to write a first draft, I'm playing. I think, "Could this be weirder?" I tried out a lot of different things before I landed on the concept of a boy born with a bird living inside of him. The idea came to me a long time ago, so it's a little fuzzy, but I remember thinking a lot about my own middle school and high school years. Right before I started writing Owen and Gail's story, I was reading Aimee Bender's collection, *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt*. Bender's stories are full of metaphor. It's a striking collection of stories that are tragedy glistening with magic. I wanted that, something that took an idea that was tragic—feelings of isolation and loneliness—but made it magical, something special. I remember writing the line, "I have a bird living inside of my chest. Her name is Gail. She's always been there." The rest of the book formed around the idea of what happens when you share your secrets with the world.

Q: Did your own upbringing influence the setting of this story and its characters' connections to nature?

A: Absolutely! My grandfather lives on the Puget Sound just outside of Olympia, Washington. When I was a child, I spent weeks at his house every summer. My family also spent a lot of time fishing and camping in Oregon forests and along the coast. One of my favorite things was simply being quiet in nature. I remember camping with my family and waking up before anyone else. I would stand next to the water when it was so quiet. There's something powerful about standing next to a large body of water and being completely still. When I was real young, I was kind of a loner, and we had this big backyard in Portland. It felt like a forest in the middle of the city. I would spend hours tucked in the trees, watching for snakes and squirrels. Being in the woods shaped me in my youth, and it shaped Owen, too.

Q: How did you come up with the Army of Acronyms as the antagonist of this story?

A: Bureaucracies and government bodies mean different things to members of marginalized groups than they do those in power. I grew up a poor, white, trans woman in the United States in the '90s. I had friends who were in the foster care system. We know that the police brutalize Black communities. As someone who is medically transitioning, I know what it's like to be caught up in a medical system

that doesn't listen to you or is maybe more concerned with research than it is real health care. In the book, Janice comes off as paranoid, and that's intentional, but her instincts are partly correct. The doctor *does* search for Owen for years with the intention of running experiments on him and Gail. I think it's easy for a straight, white, cis, able-bodied person to think that these government entities and healthcare systems are here to help you, but that is only because these systems were designed to help certain people, while other communities have been actively ignored and discarded. I am very fortunate to live in Portland, OR, a city known for its trans health care, and I have found doctors who will listen to me, but it was a long process finding healthcare professionals who were trans competent. All of this was present in my mind when I thought about what real world dangers Owen would face for having a bird in his chest.

Q: Did you see yourself in Owen, or alternatively, in any of the other main characters?

A: I think I'm in a little bit of each of these characters, but honestly, the character I most identify with is Gail. I'm silly but also often sad, and I try to bring optimism to any room I am in. There are lots of moments where Gail is quiet, when she is simply feeling the air, and that's something I can relate to a lot. Of course, I relate to Owen in certain ways, too. In many ways, the community I found surrounding punk music saved my life. Punk shows were the first places I ever found people who were unapologetically queer. I know what it's like to feel like there's no one else like you in the whole world.

Q: How does writing a novel compare to poetry, essay, or other forms of writing you've previously published?

A: Writing eludes me much of the time. It feels like chasing a slippery, invisible thing. I reserve my mornings for chasing words, playing at my desk, and trying on different ideas. So often, I think I have an idea for a story, but then it becomes clear it's actually an essay. Sometimes, an essay idea will weasel its way into a story, but everything I'm working

on is always influencing everything else, so bits of poetry find space in my essays and story narratives show up in my poetry. I also read a lot while I write. I'm always reading one poetry and one short story collection, a novel, and I read at least an essay a day, so I have a lot to turn to when I need to get my wheels turning. I am sure to an outsider, my Word documents look chaotic, but eventually something clicks into place, and I start to understand what I'm writing. Then I'm able to move bits and pieces around and pull from my notebooks until an essay or poem or novel or whatever the piece of writing is supposed to become emerges.

Q: You call this a story of "queer joy." What does that mean to you?

A: I wanted to write a story where queer characters moved past survival and, instead, sought to thrive and find joy. Queer joy is finding community where you feel held up by friends and family who see you and celebrate you. For a lot of us, tolerance and acceptance are not enough. We want celebration. We want joy. The queer and trans people who make up my family are so special. We deserve to be celebrated. We deserve love. We deserve laughter. I wanted to tell a story that didn't center coming out or "coming out terms" with one's queerness. I wanted the book to be closer to my own experience, where coming out and living as trans person has been met with celebration and joy. Not *always* joy, but more joy than pain.

Q: Who is your Gail?

A: I think the question is "What is my Gail?" What is the secret that I was born with that I felt I needed to hide from the world?

I grew up not feeling "right" or "correct" in my person. When I was a child, I would have daydreams of discovering I was an alien that had been plopped down on this earth with no context. My family was part of a very evangelical church, like speaking-in-tongues-in-church-basements type of evangelical. The sermons at these churches were always very anti-queer and anti-trans. I didn't feel a kinship to most of the people I was in community with. I knew something separated me from these people, but I didn't know what it was.

“
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”

In that sense, my Gail, the thing others would label me a “Terror” for, is the fact that I’m a trans woman. My gender confounded me for much of my life. I wasn’t like some other trans people. I didn’t grow up trying on my sisters’ dresses and wearing lipstick when no one was looking. I didn’t have moments of gender euphoria. It was only the gender dysphoria for me, the parts that felt wrong. I came of age in the ’90s, and because I was so sheltered, I didn’t meet another trans woman until I was in my twenties. I had very few queer role models to look up to, both in my personal life and within our wider culture. When I came out as a queer person in my twenties and then again as a trans woman in my thirties, I had a lot of shame and denial to reckon with. I am still reckoning with that shame, but I’m grateful to have gotten to know my Gail now. She’s a lovely bird inside of me.

Q: What are your hopes for queer and trans representation in literature, and in the rest of the world?

A: I have high hopes! I want every kind of story for us, stories where we get our hearts broken or are the ones breaking the hearts. I want stories where we save the day and others where we cause great harm. I want the world to see so many stories about trans and queer people that they begin to understand how prevalent and varied our lives are. I want others to see our pain and our joy and our laughter and our tears and our stage fright and our bellyaches and our triumphs.

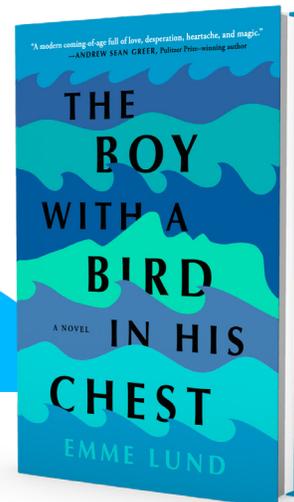
Q: What do you want and expect queer/trans readers to take away from this story? Is that the same or different for straight/cisgender readers?

A: I don’t know if it’s ever a good idea to expect a reader to take something away from one of my works, but I do hope queer/trans readers see themselves on the page. I hope they see love and chosen family as a possibility. I hope they laugh a lot. I hope the story sticks to their ribs in the way that good stories that feel like we could have lived them do. If a reader is reading this and beginning to understand a queerness inside of them, I hope this story helps them understand that there are so many people like us in the world and that a life full of joy and love is possible.

I have similar hopes for readers who are straight and cisgender. I hope they see themselves on the page, and if nothing speaks to them on the personal level, I hope they understand what it can like feel like to grow up feeling so utterly different from everyone around you. I also hope they laugh a lot.

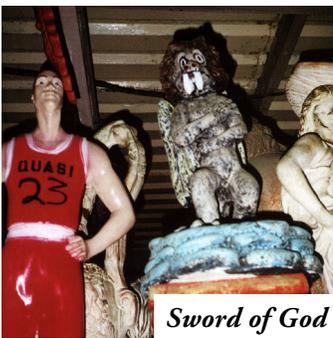
Q: Do you have a next project in mind?

A: I’m working on a novel about choosing to love yourself even while the world is ending around you. Recently, I’ve also been really interested in scriptwriting for TV and film. I would love to be a part of an adaptation of Owen’s story for the screen. I don’t think we’re done hearing from him and Gail.



..... PLAYLIST *for*

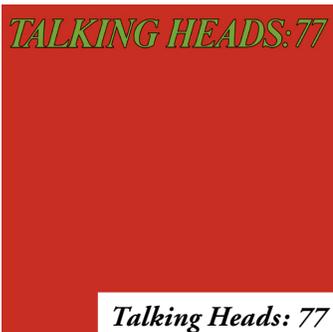
THE **BOY** WITH A **BIRD** IN HIS **CHEST**



Sword of God

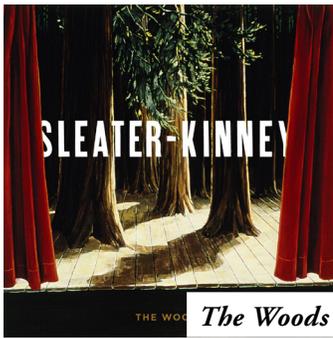
"IT'S RAINING" / QUASI

When I was fifteen, I snuck out of my parents' house and hopped in my friend's car. He was also fifteen with only a driver's permit, and he'd technically stolen the car from his dad's house. We drove forty-five miles north to Portland OR, to see Harvey Danger, Hazel, and Quasi at one of Portland's many now defunct music venues. The whole night was electric. Quasi absolutely blew my mind. When I was writing the beginning of the book I thought about this song a lot because the novel opens with a rainstorm and flood.



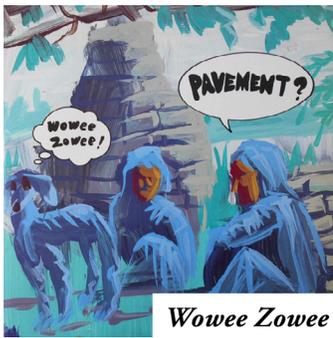
"PSYCHO KILLER" / TALKING HEADS

The punk band I was in in high school covered this song, so I played it many times at shows in garages and cafes, often for a crowd of no more than ten people. I love it. It's so weird. David Byrne's random yelps and French make it seem out of this world to an American audience. I thought it would be a nice song for Owen and his mother to dance to in the living room.



“MODERN GIRL” / SLEATER-KINNEY

This is one of me and my wife’s favorite songs, the kind of song I can put on at the end of the day, and it will get us both off the couch and dancing in no time. It’s such a queer anthem. I have fond memories of rooms full of friends yelling the lyrics. It’s so easy to imagine Owen and his friends doing the same.



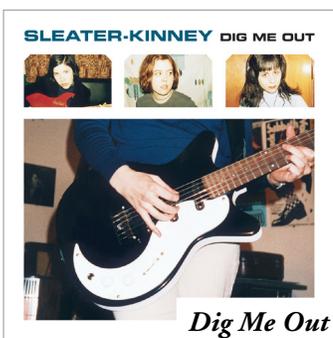
“GRAVE ARCHITECTURE” / PAVEMENT

I’m dating myself here, but this was one of the first songs I ever downloaded on LimeWire on the family computer, a habit that quickly infected the machine with a ton of viruses. This is the soundtrack to the moments post-party, when only a few people are left and you’re all sharing a joint. Stephen Malkmus is the king of melodic guitar riffs.



“PARANOID ANDROID” / RADIOHEAD

When I played Dungeons and Dragons in middle school, we always took scheduled dance/mosh breaks. No song was better at amping us up than this one. You get to do everything to this song: spin and twirl, and when the time comes, hop in the pit. I love imagining Owen listening to it the first time.



“DIG ME OUT” / SLEATER-KINNEY

Definitely breaking some rules by putting two songs by Sleater-Kinney on this list, but it’s what Owen, Gail, and Tennessee would want. This song has big driving around as a teenager with a new driver’s license energy, and it’s what comes to my mind when I remember what it felt like to be sixteen.



“ROMANTIC THEORY” / CAR SEAT HEADREST

I was in my twenties when this band started recording but I love them so much. They have an indie punk aesthetic that is so fun to me. Also, this is by far the band with the silliest name and so they absolutely had to be included in the novel. I think they would have played at the Fort if they’d had the opportunity.



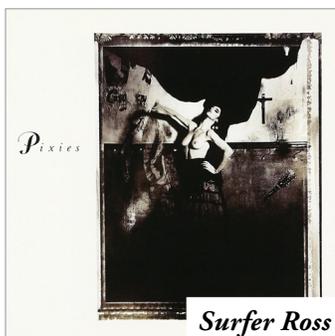
“WILD SAGE” / THE MOUNTAIN GOATS

How could I write a book about queer teenagers and not include The Mountain Goats? The band is queer canon. I listened to this album a ton when I was going through a breakup, and it was so nice to have my loneliness reflected back at me. I played this album and this song in particular a lot when I was writing the second half of Book Two of the novel. Listening to this song is like sitting in an open field on a hot day when the air buzzes. You’re alone but it feels like John Darnielle is also alone, so there’s at least two of you.



“NO INTENTION” / DIRTY PROJECTORS

This band changed a lot for me. They made music feel fresh again. They “cracked me open” to quote Owen. Each song is through-composed, and the vocals are simply angelic.



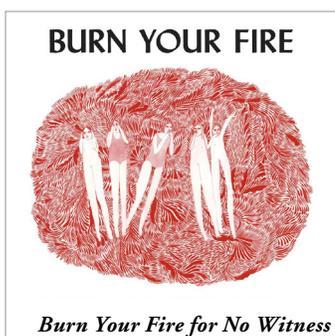
“BONE MACHINE” / PIXIES

My first girlfriend got me into the Pixies. We connected by making our way through their discography together. I imagined the energy of this song hitting Clyde just right when he hears them playing over the shitty speaker in the school hallway for the first time. The screams feel so cathartic. Clyde must’ve wanted to let some screams loose like Black Francis.



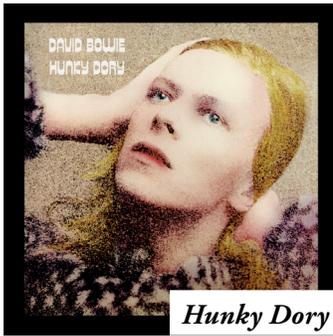
“YOU WERE RIGHT” / BUILT TO SPILL

I wanted a lot of the music in the book to be by bands based in the Pacific Northwest. Built to Spill is based out of Boise, ID, and they feel quintessentially Northwest to me. I also wanted some music that spanned generations a bit, something that Owen could put on and Bob and Natalie would groove to. This is one of those songs that I’ve been listening to for twenty years, but I still absolutely love it.



“UNFUCKTHEWORLD” / ANGEL OLSEN

I really love the moment when Angel’s music shows up in the book. It’s so clear that Owen and Clyde are in different places. Owen is so sad and he’s listening to music that mirrors his emotional state, while Clyde is looking for music that stimulates him, expands his energy. Angel Olsen is so good at making you feel like she’s singing directly to you.



Hunky Dory

“OH! YOU PRETTY THINGS” / DAVID BOWIE

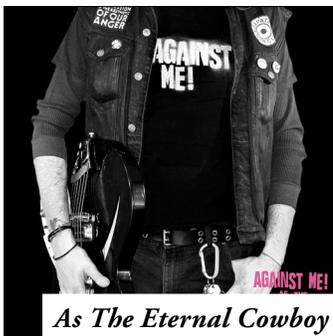
I heard David Bowie’s music long before I ever saw him, so when I saw him as Ziggy Stardust, I was blown away. He was so bright and loud and femme. I’d never seen someone who looked like that. My teenage love for Bowie gave me permission to wear makeup and dress femme and explore those parts of my gender which eventually led to me coming out as a woman. Listening to David Bowie will make you reconsider your gender.



New Skin for the Old Ceremony

“IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED” / LEONARD COHEN

I was struggling with the party scene where this song appears before the song was in the book. I knew it was missing something. The vibes were off. I went for a walk, which is what I do when I’m frustrated with work, and I put on Leonard’s discography on shuffle. (Truly chaotic, I know.) This song came on as I walked through the grounds of the Zen Center near my house, and I knew it belonged in the book. I went home and immediately finished writing the scene.



As The Eternal Cowboy

“TURN THOSE CLAPPING HANDS INTO ANGRY BALLED FISTS” / AGAINST ME!

In my mind, this song comes into Owen’s life just after the book ends. He hears about Against Me! in the last few days of the book, and I love to think of him going to a record store, buying the album, and playing the CD as soon as he can. He would love Against Me! so much. I remember being near Owen’s age and hearing them for the first time and thinking they were so special. All hail Laura Jane Grace.

..... LISTEN TO THIS PLAYLIST ON SPOTIFY

bit.ly/BWABplaylist