



This Is How It Always Is

By Laurie Frankel

About the Author

Laurie Frankel is the *New York Times* bestselling, award-winning author of four novels. Her writing has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *People Magazine*, *Lit Hub*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and other publications. She is the recipient of the Washington State Book Award and the Endeavor Award. Her novels have been translated into more than twenty-five languages and been optioned for film and TV. A former college professor, she now writes full-time in Seattle, Washington where she lives with her family and makes good soup.

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About the Book

***This is how* a family keeps a secret...and how that secret ends up keeping them.** *This is how* a family lives happily ever after...until happily ever after becomes complicated. *This is how* children change...and then change the world.

When Rosie and Penn and their four boys welcome the newest member of their family, no one is surprised it's another baby boy. But at least their large, loving, chaotic family knows what to expect.

But Claude is not like his brothers. One day he puts on a dress and refuses to take it off. He wants to bring a purse to kindergarten. He wants hair long enough to sit on. When he grows up, Claude says, he wants to be a girl.

Rosie and Penn aren't panicked at first. Kids go through phases, after all, and make-believe is fun. But soon the entire family is keeping Claude's secret. Until one day it explodes.

This Is How It Always Is is a novel about revelations, transformations, fairy tales, and family. And it's about the ways this is how it always is: Change is always hard and miraculous and hard again; parenting is always a leap into the unknown with crossed fingers and full hearts; children grow but not always according to plan. And families with secrets don't get to keep them forever.

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Discussion Questions

1. How do the epigraphs help prepare the reader for the many crossroads the Walsh-Adams family will have to face? What about the first word of the novel, “but”?
2. When Rosie and Penn first go to see Mr. Tongo about Claude, he asks them to divide behaviors into “boy” and “girl” columns. Do you think their conclusions are accurate? Are they fair? Discuss what you think it means to be a man, a woman, or “something else.”
3. In what ways does the book tackle typical definitions of boys and girls, men and women? Did it change your view of gender and identity as you read?
4. When Rosie first takes Poppy on playdates with other girls, the moms begin telling her how brave she is. “Rosie appreciated the support but wasn’t sure parenting ever really qualified as brave — or maybe it always did — because it’s not like you had a choice.” How are each of the characters brave? Discuss how (or if) parenting requires acts of bravery.
5. When Claude begins to voice his love of dresses, Rosie tells us, “Didn’t you know then, the doctors said later? Weren’t you listening?” Do you think our expectations of people, such as Rosie and Penn’s expectations of Claude, get in the way of us actually listening to them? Knowing them?
6. After Jane Doe’s trauma, Rosie thinks, “Head colds should be tolerated. Children should be celebrated.” What is the difference between tolerance and acceptance? Acceptance and celebration? Discuss how language, down to the pronouns we use, affects the way we interact with people different from ourselves.
7. When Rosie feels guilt for forcing Roo to move, Carmelo tells her, “Parents choose one kid over another all the time.” Do you agree with this statement? How about Rosie’s earlier conclusion that “of course you could uproot a whole family of seven for the needs of just one of them because that’s what family means”?
8. “They never planned to keep Claude a secret. It was an accident. It was an accident plus opportunity plus special circumstances.” Do you think Penn and Rosie are hypocrites for keeping Poppy’s secret, and expecting the rest of the family to do the same? Are they truly to blame, or was the secret forced on all of them?
9. After Poppy’s secret is revealed, Rosie and Penn have an argument about how to move forward. Penn says, “As parents, we make a thousand decisions a year with life-altering impact whose implications our kids couldn’t possibly get their heads around. That’s our job. That’s what parenting is.” Rosie counters with, “She’s got to be lost for a bit, and she can’t be lost if we’re leading her out of the woods.” Where do you fall in this argument?

10. When Rosie and Penn discuss what course Poppy should take before puberty, Rosie says: “When a little girl wants to wear jeans and play soccer, her parents are thrilled, but when a little boy wants to wear a dress and play dolls, his parents send him to therapy and enroll him in a study.” Are young boys more constrained by gender stereotypes than young girls? Does the weight of gendered expectations shift from one gender to another as we grow up? If so, when? Consider what Rosie says just a few pages later: “You think Poppy would be the only woman to hate the way she looks? All women hate the way they look.”

11. When Rosie speaks to Mr. Tongo after Poppy is outed, he tells her: “For you, Poppy with a penis isn’t any more or less variant than any of your other kids’ wonderful quirks, and you love them all no matter what, and you just wake every day and raise them up. But that doesn’t help Poppy live anywhere in the world besides your house. No wonder she won’t leave her bedroom.” Did Rosie and Penn contribute to Poppy’s identity crisis by sheltering her from judgment?

12. In what ways are we as a society trapped in gender stereotypes? Do we make children less free by assigning them a label, and things to go with that label, so early in life? Discuss the differences in freedom experienced by Americans and Thai people as shown in the novel.

13. Discuss the ways in which Rosie and Claude discover both their immense privilege and their forced conformity when they get to know Thai culture and people.

14. In the penultimate, fairy tale chapter, the witch tells Grumwald that he must share his story, that “story is the best magic there is.” What is the importance of sharing stories? Do secrets have their place as well, or do you agree that “secrets make everyone alone”?

15. Think about the standard fairy tale structure --- in what ways is this novel a fairy tale? Is it the tale of Penn and Rosie, or Poppy? Their family? Or do you consider it another kind of story altogether?

16. When Penn decides to box up the family photos after their move, he does so because “Poppy’s childhood did matter, and so did Claude’s, but Penn bubble wrapped them all back up anyway until he could find a way to tell this story.” With the publication of *The Adventures of Grumwald and Princess Stephanie*, does he succeed in telling their family story? What do you think of his choice to make their story public?

17. When comforting Poppy, Ben says, “Fitting in and being normal doesn’t exist.” How does the novel continuously challenge the idea of “normal”?

Retrieved from: [This Is How It Always Is by Laurie Frankel | Book Club Discussion Questions | ReadingGroupGuides.com](#)

Author Interview

As a follow-up to her recent book review, Grace had the opportunity to talk with Laurie Frankel, the author behind the new novel, *This Is How It Always Is*. Grace and Laurie dove into how the novel came to be, what the response from readers has been like, and the ultimate lesson she hopes people everywhere will learn about parenting.

Grace: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me, Laurie! *This Is How It Always Is* is a really incredible story, and one that has sparked so many conversations in my life. Can you start by telling me a little bit about you and your family, and how you came to write the book?

Laurie: Thank you so much! I live in Seattle with my family—my husband and my daughter, who is [transgender](#), so that was the preliminary autobiographical seed of the book. That said, though, the book is very, very, *very* made up, so the fact that the story includes a transgender kid is really as far as the parallel goes with respect to my own life. For example, I have but the one child, and the thing I knew about this book from the beginning was that I needed to have *five* kids in the family. To me, the whole family just feels so fictional, so the part that had anything to do with my life sort of disappeared for me in the process. Even Poppy feels so far away from my own child, because I imagined Poppy and made her up, so the difference between that child and my own seems enormous. The beginning of the book was really a matter of creating all of these characters, but otherwise it wasn't really clear to me where the story was going to go.

Grace: I'm curious how you knew that the family needed to have five kids. How did you land on five?

Laurie: I didn't so much as land there as take off from there. Having five kids was the seed of the whole story, because I really wanted to think about a child being transgender as just one of all of the things that your child can be, and I really wanted to think of those challenges as sort of par for the course, both for the kids and for the parents. That's actually where the title comes from: this is how it *a/ways* is. The particulars vary of course, most kids are not transgender, but most kids are gender nonconforming sometimes or in some ways, and all kids are nonconforming in one way or another. I think that frequently we look at kids who are transgender as being really on the far end of the spectrum, and I just don't think of it like that. So I thought the best way to think about that was to put Poppy with a bunch of other kids, which would give me the space to explore the ways in which families can have these kinds of challenges for all kids in a wide variety of ways. The whole story was really webbed with those five children.

Grace: Yes, that makes so much sense. Actually, one of my favorite parts of the novel was seeing those sibling relationships develop and change over time, and how Poppy was situated within this big family with all of these other kids who *also* make some pretty big transformations throughout the book. Maybe much of the book is focused on Rosie and Penn and their process as parents, but the siblings also play some really critical roles in the book. We really get to see how they all adjust to this change, while also living their lives and growing up. I think that aspect of the book is really unique.

Laurie: Yes, exactly that. I think it's true that changes like this are going to change everyone, and that it always works both ways. Poppy's transformation is certainly going to have an impact on everybody else, but everybody else's transformations are also going to have an impact on her. Being transgender and transitioning is not an isolated occurrence, and it shouldn't be. Again, I wanted to show that this is just one of the many changes that kids will undergo. Kids are changing constantly, all the time, and becoming new people every day. So, in many ways this is outstanding, and in other ways it isn't at all. It's just part of childhood, it's part of sibling hood, and its part of being a member of a family.

Grace: I love that. I hope that's the direction we're heading in when talking about trans kids.

Laurie: Me too. In fact, the early struggles of the book were that there just wasn't enough plot to work with. For trans kids who are coming out and transitioning, there may be some period of unrest, but the rest of it is mostly just being a kid and growing up. Much of the struggle at the beginning was figuring out the day-to-day part of it, given that the day-to-day part of it, by definition, is very boring. That being said, I knew that I did not want to write about a family divided. I didn't want to talk about a parent who was going to say, "No, I reject this. I cannot love you if this is how you're going to behave." I think it's an old story, and I hope that it's a story we are retiring. Of course, that is a lot of people's stories, and I have gotten a lot of emails in response to this book that have been along the lines of, "When I came out a generation ago, it wasn't like this, and I hope it is this way going forward." I hope that talking about it in this way will make the story that I have told the more frequent one, rather than the one where parents are automatically rejecting.

Grace: Absolutely. I think it's a more complicated story that you're presenting in a lot of ways, but it is also more accurate, in that things inevitably will get a little messy at times. Yes, Rosie and Penn don't outright reject Poppy in any way, but they do have some hiccups, some doubts, and some disagreements on how to proceed. The siblings too have some moments of feeling like, "But does it have to be this way?" I think those moments are normal and they happen for any family no matter how accepting they may

present themselves, but it's not the polarizing story that we've gotten used to hearing. Reality is a lot more nuanced and a lot more complex than that.

Laurie: It is, and I think it's more interesting also, just in that it creates the opportunity to address their follow-up questions. If your answer is, "No, I will not allow this, and if you continue to behave this way then I won't love you anymore," then there's nothing that can happen next, other than all of the heartbreak of that situation. There's not a lot of story there. I think a more interesting question is what happens after you say, "Okay." That's really the question I wanted to tackle in this book.

Grace: Ok, I want to talk about the ending of the book, because it definitely didn't end how I was expecting it to! As I was getting near the end of the book, I began to think that Poppy was really heading towards more of a [non-binary](#) identity rather than identifying as a trans girl. There are some conversations between Rosie and Penn when they talk about finding a middle way for Poppy, and how they have to support her in finding her own way with her gender identity. And then there's that moment at the school dance, when Poppy's friend asks, "Are you a boy or a girl?" and Poppy says "No." But we as readers really don't know where she stands at the end of the book in terms of how she identifies and understands her gender.

Laurie: Yes, and that was exactly my hope. I would like you to not know where she stands at the end of this book. It goes back to the whole question of: what happens when you settle on "he" or "she," what happens when you settle on a name, and what is in all of that? I think that, as much as possible, Poppy—and as much as possible *all* children—do better when they can live some place in between, when they can be comfortable and have everyone else be comfortable with something other than one end of any spectrum you care to name. I think parents of autistic kids, for example, have done a ton of work on this. Indeed, the world gets better for *everyone* when we can be comfortable with the in-between. So it was definitely my hope that we would end the book really not knowing which direction this kid was going to go, and being comfortable with that. "Which" isn't really the right question; it's more of both, or neither, for Poppy and for most kids in some way. In fact, I have gotten a lot of emails from people who want to know what happens next, and the truth is that I do not know the answer to that question, and I do not want to know the answer to that question.

Grace: Yes, and that ambiguity is totally valid! Who do you most hope reads this book? Who do you think can benefit from it?

Laurie: Well, of course I hope everyone in the world reads this book! But I think that much more realistically I hope that people who have gender nonconforming kids are picking up this book and feeling like it speaks to their experience. I also really hope that

people who don't have—or don't *know* that they have—trans kids or LGBT kids in their lives will pick up this book and realize that they probably *do*, and that they realize how these things that are becoming these huge divisive issues in politics at the moment are really not at all. I just think this is *so simple*. I think that there are a lot of people who think that, "Well if my kid did this, here's what I would do." And I just think, "Um, no you wouldn't." For most people, I hope, if your kid comes to you and says, "Here's this thing," that you're going to say, "Okay, well, I love you, so let's see what we can do to help." What happens after that is complicated, but it's not up for debate, and it's not controversial. I think that's hard to see in the way that the debate is framed politically at the moment, so I hope that this book will sort of show the simplicity of how *extremely* normal these kids and these families are. That's what I hope.

Grace: Yeah, I hope so too. Our co-founder, [Kristin Russo](#), actually wrote a book in 2014 called *This Is a Book for Parents of Gay Kids*—it's a question-and-answer guide for parents of LGBTQ kids. We talk a lot about how it should actually just be called *This Is a Book for Parents*, because we think that all parents should read it and should know these things regardless of whether or not their kid has come out—because guess what? They might in the future! And even if they don't, it's just about accepting all of the ways that kids are constantly changing and developing, and the ways that they're all nonconforming in some way.

Laurie: Yes, exactly. I really think parenting is an exercise in unpredictability, in that whatever you have suited up for will not be what is actually on the table. However, whatever *is* on the table is going to have to be dealt with lovingly, and the options only come into play after that. Something is going to come up, it *isn't* going to be what you imagined, you *are* going to have to deal with it, you *aren't* going to have any idea of what to do, but you *are* going to have to do it anyway. That *is* parenting. In that way, with this book, the notion of the child being trans is sort of a metaphor, and it definitely would have been interesting to know how this book would have been different if my own story didn't come into play. I certainly have been grateful to talk about it and speak to those families, but I really do feel like *this is how it always is*, no matter what.

Retrieved from: [Interviewing Laurie Frankel, Author of "This Is How It Always Is" — My Kid is Gay](#)

Other Links and Resources:

Want to know more, such as essays, interviews and more:

<https://www.lauriefrankel.net/bits--pieces.html>

Gender Resources: <https://www.lauriefrankel.net/this-is-how-it-always-is-book-club-guide.html>

Book Review: <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-reading-guides/fiction/10873-this-is-how-it-always-is-frankel?start=2>

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| Ugh! | | It was OK... | | Loved it! |

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Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: