



Book Club Set

# This is How It Always Is

By Laurie Frankel

## About the Author



Laurie Frankel is the New York Times bestselling, award-winning author of five novels. Her writing has also appeared in The New York Times, The Guardian, The Washington Post, Poets & Writers, 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 don't panic 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 WalshAdams 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:

<https://images.macmillan.com/folio-assets/rgg-guides/9781250088550RGG.pdf>

## Author Interview



**Let's start with an icebreaker! I read on your website that you make good soup. I'd love to know your favorite — both to consume and make. Is there a recipe you're comfortable sharing?**

Ha! It's so funny to me that that's become part of my official bio and (therefore) one of the questions I get asked most often. I've been posting pics of my soups on Instagram as a result. I'm thinking of starting on salads too.

I can't share a recipe, not because I'm not comfortable, but because I don't have any. I feel like the beauty of soup is that you saute an onion and then just keep throwing whatever you've got on hand into a pot until it tastes good. This is also, as it happens, the way I write novels.

My most frequently made is probably lentil kale soup, in part because I always have the ingredients in my pantry/fridge, in part because I have a kid to feed and it's sooo good for you, and in part because it's easy and delicious.

**Your books center on love and family. What are some of your favorite family-focused books?**

I mean, there are so, so many, especially since I like to define (and write and read about) family pretty broadly and non-traditionally. Some favorites: *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Stranger Care* by Sarah Sentilles, *Arcadia* by Lauren Groff, *Black Swan Green* by David Mitchell, *Kantika* by Elizabeth Graver, *The Family Fang* by Kevin Wilson, *A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki, *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver, *The English Understand Wool* by Helen DeWitt, *Foster* by Claire Keegan. And *Hamlet*. *Hamlet's* a goodie.

**You show a lot of sensitivity and empathy in your work, particularly when it comes to voices that aren't often heard in fiction (transgender people, people with disabilities, etc). What are some of your favorite bookish examples of these under-represented communities?**

Thank you, I appreciate that. Some favorite books by/about trans people: Redefining Realness by Janet Mock, Stuck in the Middle With You by Jennifer Finney Boylan, Detransition, Baby by Torrey Peters, Frankissstein by Jeanette Winterson, The Ministry of Utmost Happiness by Arundhati Roy.

Some favorite books by/about disabled people: So Lucky by Nicola Griffith, Year of the Tiger by Alice Wong, If At Birth You Don't Succeed by Zach Anner, Golem Girl by Riva Lehrer, Fearlessly Different by Mickey Rowe.

**In a related vein, books/reading can be a form of advocacy and storytelling can be a protest. Are there any books you'd recommend for folks looking to be better allies and protesters on behalf of communities still fighting for their civil rights?**

Honestly, any of them. As many as possible. I believe to the tips of my toes that writing and sharing stories, reading and telling and retelling them, engaging with other people's stories in every way possible is the best advocacy, the best allyship there is.

So read widely, read constantly, read the ones that make you feel seen, read the ones that make you feel uncomfortable or invisible or confused or at sea, read the ones that comfort and the ones that discomfit. Read without worry about your agenda or the author's. As long as you're reading and thinking about what you're reading, you're making the world a better place. It's such good work.

**The audiobook version of One Two Three is incredible, featuring a different voice actor for each of the narrators, as well as an authentic speech device for Mirabel.**



**Was this your vision for the audiobook from the get-go? It almost listens like a made-for-audio drama.**

Macmillan Audio did an incredible, incredible job, and I am so grateful. I don't usually have much to do with the audiobook — it's far outside my skill set — but in this case it was clear to me early on that the audiobook was going to have to overcome some significant challenges (not unlike the characters in the book).

One Two Three is narrated by three different girls, one of whom, Mirabel, uses three different voices. It was really important that the sisters sound different from one another (because they navigate the world so differently) but also that Mirabel's three voices are very different from one another. As you say, one of Mirabel's voices is a machine, and that needed to be authentic, but it was also a translation issue — that machine doesn't sound weird to Mirabel or her sisters because they're used to it, so it couldn't sound too strange or jarring or foreign to the listener. I brought all these concerns to Macmillan Audio, and they figured out beautiful answers to all of them. They did a fantastic job.

**Are there writers or books that have especially influenced your writing, whether on a stylistic level or simply as inspiration for your career?**

Also so, so many. So many. I am always reading. I read while I write — like literally while I write, so I have a book open on my lap and the laptop on the desk, a book on a pillow next to me while I'm typing on the sofa. I am not a particularly fast reader, but because I am always doing it, I usually read about a book a week. Because I am a novelist, I am almost always reading fiction, but within that, I read as widely and variously as I can. And I'm influenced by all of them, even when I don't like something or don't think it works — sometimes those are the books from which I learn the most.

**What kind of reading do you do in your free time? Any favorite genres or authors you return to?**

All the reading I do is work. And all of it is also enjoyable. For fun I read plays. Shakespeare — which has to be pure fun because none of us can emulate Shakespeare — but other plays as well. Plays (with the admitted exception of Shakespeare) are pretty quick reads, so you can get through the whole thing in a sitting. And they're doing what novels are doing — telling a story beginning to end carried by character — but with one hand tied behind their backs. So they teach you a lot too.

**This might be covered in the above questions, but do you have any all-time favorite books that have had an outsized influence on your life? Books you think about and recommend on a regular basis?**

It's true I've listed lots of my very favorites in the questions above. Other favorites though: *The Power* by Naomi Alderman, *The Trees* by Percival Everett, *A Spot of Bother* (another great family story!) by Mark Haddon, *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki, *The God of Small Things* by Adundhati Roy (again, great family story) (apparently I really like family stories), *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. Wow, this answer is pretty all over the place. Did I mention *Hamlet*?

## Other Links and Resources



- A letter to early readers about why this story is so hard to tell and why she did it anyway <https://www.lauriefrankel.net/dear-early-readers.html>
- Gender Resources from Laurie Frankel:  
<https://www.lauriefrankel.net/this-is-how-it-always-is-book-club-guide.html>
- This Is How It Always Is Book Trailer:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzAXCLh1qmE>

**Share your thoughts with other readers!**



DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes          No          Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: