

STRAY CITY

Custom House

By Chelsey Johnson
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Introduction

A warm, funny, and whip-smart debut novel about rebellious youth, inconceivable motherhood, and the complications of belonging—to a city, a culture, and a family—when none of them can quite contain who you really are.

All of us were refugees of the nuclear family . . .

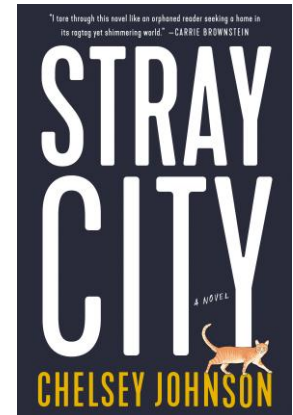
Twenty-three-year-old artist Andrea Morales escaped her Midwestern Catholic childhood—and the closet—to create a home and life for herself within the thriving but insular lesbian underground of Portland, Oregon. But one drunken night, reeling from a bad breakup and a friend's betrayal, she recklessly crosses enemy lines and hooks up with a man. To her utter shock, Andrea soon discovers she's pregnant—and despite the concerns of her astonished circle of gay friends, she decides to have the baby.

A decade later, when her precocious daughter Lucia starts asking questions about the father she's never known, Andrea is forced to reconcile the past she hoped to leave behind with the life she's worked so hard to build.

A thoroughly modern and original anti-romantic comedy, *Stray City* is an unabashedly entertaining literary debut about the families we're born into and the families we choose, about finding yourself by breaking the rules, and making bad decisions for all the right reasons.

Questions for Discussion

1. "I need the identity as a weapon, to match the weapon that society has against me." *Stray City* opens with this quotation from Susan Sontag, and the story seems to both reinforce and challenge the idea of labels with Andrea's own personal journey. Through Andrea's father we get a glimpse of what it meant to be Mexican-American in rural Nebraska. For Andrea's Catholic mother, "Her convictions became her fortress," to the extent that she rejects her own child for breaking with doctrine. And at one point, Andrea even says about the Lesbian Mafia, "It seemed in our urgency to redefine ourselves against the norm, we'd formed a church of our own, as doctrinaire as any, and we too abhorred a heretic." Why do you think each character clings to or pushes away certain identities? What do you think *Stray City* is saying about labeling identity? When is it useful and when is it not?



2. Early in the novel, Andrea characterizes she and her friends as “refugees of the nuclear family,” saying they are, “secret agents in our homes of origin but full citizens here.” Discuss the idea of “home” in *Stray City*. Is home where you are born, raised, or can it be a place or city or people you claim as your own? How does Andrea create a home for herself during the different phases of her life?
 3. Why do you think the novel is called *Stray City*? How do “strays,” both literal and metaphorical, figure into the story?
 4. How do you think Andrea’s own family background affects what follows, from her fear of telling her friends about Ryan to her choice to have Lucia?
 5. How do you think it affects the events of the story that *Stray City* takes place largely in the ‘90s? And how might Andrea’s story differ if it was set in contemporary America?
 6. Andrea describes Ryan as a guy “who was always gone or about to be”. Why do you think he chooses to do what he does? Is it justifiable?
 7. Throughout most of the novel, Andrea questions her relationship with Ryan, hiding it from her queer friends and wondering why she seems to be attracted to a man for the first time in her life. Why do you think Andrea is attracted to Ryan, and vice versa, and what makes that complicated for each of them? Do you think Andrea and Ryan truly love each other? Why or why not?
 8. When Ryan and Andrea visit the coast together, she thinks to herself, "So this is what it's like . . . to hold hands and not garner a single glance. How strange." How does Andrea experience straight privilege, and why do you think it unnerves her so much?
 9. Following the news of her pregnancy and her parent’s visit to Portland, Andrea realizes that her relationship with Ryan is her “chance to regain citizenship” in her family of origin—and that all she has to do is continue along this path by having her baby “in their nation: the land of man plus woman equals baby as God intended it.” Yet the very thought of continuing this way makes her feel as if she’s losing herself. What do you think her inner conflict says about the seemingly perpetual battle between following the status quo and being true to yourself?
 10. In part three, Andrea has created a family for herself that includes her daughter, Lucia, and her loving partner, Beatriz. But then Lucia begins her own quest to understand her identity, and searches for the father she’s never met. How does family, in all its meanings, shape a person’s identity? How does this play out for Andrea? For Lucia?
 11. Discuss the role of music for the various characters in *Stray City*. How does music shape the lives of Ryan, who’s a drummer for a living; Andrea, who’s a listener; and Lucia, who’s learning to make it herself? How does music affect, directly or indirectly, their connections to each other?
 12. Discuss the ending, and what it means to you. How did you interpret Lucia's comment to Edith Head: “I wish I had known you . . . I could have had a cat.” What do you see in the future for Andrea, Lucia, Beatriz, and Ryan, and how they might define “family”?
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