



Let Them Stare

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Contains discussion questions and activities to use in your book club, classroom, or library



★“A QUIRKY, PASSIONATE, REBELLIOUS, AND QUICK-WITTED NOVEL.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

About the Book

Sully is done with being the only gender-nonconforming person in Hearst, Pennsylvania, and their recently-secured fashion internship in New York City seems to be their ticket out of small-town life. But when their would-be boss turns out to be a flake, Sully is left with no car, no job, and no escape from Hearst. Things take a turn when Sully discovers a rare vintage handbag . . . which is haunted by the ghost of a female impersonator who died in their town sometime in the 1950s. Sully’s initially dead-end summer quickly becomes packed with scheming, city archival snooping, and even run-ins with police as they collaborate with Brad, the only other gay kid in town, to solve the mystery of Rufus’s death. As Sully and Brad delve into the history of their hometown, they discover there might be more to Hearst than they ever knew.

About the Authors

JONATHAN VAN NESS is an Emmy-winning television personality, 4x *New York Times* bestselling author, podcaster, comedian, celebrity hairstylist, and founder of JVN Hair. He stars on Netflix’s Emmy Award–winning reboot series *Queer Eye*, where he shines as the hair guru and self-care advocate; and he hosts the popular podcast *Getting Better with Jonathan Van Ness*.

JULIE MURPHY splits her time between North Texas and Kansas with her husband, who loves her, and her cats, who tolerate her. When Julie isn’t writing, she can be found watching movies so bad they’re good, hunting for the perfect slice of cheese pizza, or planning her next great travel adventure. She is the author of the middle grade novels *Dear Sweet Pea* and *Camp Sylvania* as well as the young adult novels *Ramona Blue*, *Side Effects May Vary*, the Faith series, *Pumpkin, Puddin’*, and *Dumplin’* (now a Netflix original film).



Discussion Questions

1. Until the handbag speaks, Sully doesn't seem to have any gay or trans adults in their life, both in person and online. Consider why this might be. Think about how community, place of living, historical context, social media, etc. may affect a person's likeliness of meeting other queer people. (A reminder: Queer people are everywhere!)
2. Does Sully's chaotic queer teenager behavior (pp. 67–72) feel familiar to you, or alien? Why do you think Sully feels like they need to perform prickly confidence—and how does it get in the way of their friendships? Do you think people around them see them as they are?
3. What kind of bag is a Butler? What do you picture it looking like? Draw what you think it looks like. Bonus: Draw Rufus.
4. Rufus cannot remember his own history until Sully discovers it. Do you think that ghosts want us to know them? Have you ever felt the past screaming at you?
5. Sully's respect for Lyndzi crashes quickly after her betrayal. She goes from being "Miranda Priestly" in their mind to being a morally corrupt influencer who deserves a rash (p. 189). What qualities in a person does Sully pay attention to and respect? What qualities make you respect someone?
6. Sully steps up to get Rufus out of Knollwood once and for all after Rufus remembers what happened (p. 215). Do you think bringing Rufus/Talullah back to the scene of their worst trauma was necessary? Could there be another way to unlock their memories? How?
7. What is the worst influencer scam you have ever seen? How do you think we as a society should break free from the economy of attention, scams, competitive beauty, and jealousy?
8. Rufus and Robby reference the Lavender Scare in letters (p. 137). This was a period when "homosexuals" were purged from the federal government. Queer people could be fired from jobs and denied employment because of their orientation, which was classed in the DSM as a sickness. Watch this video from *Time* on the Lavender Scare. How does this resemble current purges of trans people from the military or erasure of trans history from the Stonewall National Monument? What do you think is different about this moment in history?
9. Rufus/Talullah uses different language from Sully in describing his gender and distances him/herself from the term "drag queen" since to Rufus it means prostitution (p. 178). What does "drag queen" mean today?
10. Read the transcript of this interview with real 1970s Tuscaloosa drag queen Fred Garner and discuss how Fred's experiences line up with Rufus/Talullah's. Alternatively, read this *Female Impersonators* magazine from 1969 and discuss how their genders relate to trans people today.



Art: dinosaur by Voxel Magic; purse and outfit by Amara Felice; photograph by Alex DiGiaino

Activities

MEET A NON-GHOST

You don't have to find a handbag to talk to a queer elder. SAGE America is a social network and advocacy group fighting for the well-being of LGBTQ+ elders, some of whom face housing issues, lack of care from relatives, and other kinds of loss and isolation. <https://www.sageusa.org/what-we-do/sage-partners/> may be able to connect you with LGBTQ+ elders near you who may have a story to share. Local PFLAG groups, AIDS advocacy organizations, and bookstores may also be places to look.

TAKE A QUEER SOUNDBATH

Use this spectacularly formatted radio show/archive (<https://www.queermusicheritage.com/>) to take an aural dip into LGBTQ+ history with exclusively queer artists from the 1800s forward to the early 2010s. You can also see sheet music used by and photos of female impersonators and male impersonators like Rufus/Tallulah going back to the 1800s on this sub-page: <https://www.queermusicheritage.com/drag-sheetmusic.html>.

SLASH YOUR RESALE VALUE

Sometimes a thing remade in your image holds more value than something new. Make a date with friends to get clothes from thrift stores and redesign them to your liking. Think outside the box! You can turn a prom dress into a crop top, bedazzle some pants, get creative with sewing—whatever your heart desires!

DETOX FROM SOCIAL MEDIA

Is your screentime more than five hours a day? Think of how many ghost mysteries you could solve in that lost time. Use apps that limit screentime or lock you out of social media to take a break from seeing endless influencer content and marketing.

FIND A GHOST NEAR YOU

Taking the time to get to know our ghosts helps us understand the real duties we have toward living people we love. Gay and trans history is everywhere, even in places where people found it difficult to live openly. If you want to find a ghost, you should be patient and persistent—but don't give up. Here are some tips:

-  Queeringthemap.com has drop pins of current queer people marking places significant in their own lives all around the world. The footsteps of living gay people resound all around you!
-  Browse queer zines on <https://archive.qzap.org/>.
-  Enter the name of your state in <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/> and see what historical articles appear.
-  Invisiblehistory.org documents queer history from the South, including gay newspapers, and has some digital collections.
-  Alabama University hosts a small trove of Southern queer history at <https://queerhistory.as.ua.edu/>.
-  If you know an older queer person, ask them what community was like when they were younger, where they hung out, and what names they remember of people who aren't here anymore. Alternatively, read about Casa Susanna's 1950s retreat for transfeminine crossdressers and trans women in the Catskills or lesbian land projects in the 1970s and think about the importance of community.

Guide prepared by Hal Schrieve, BA, MLIS, Children's Librarian at New York Public Library and author. Follow Hal at @howlmarin on Instagram.