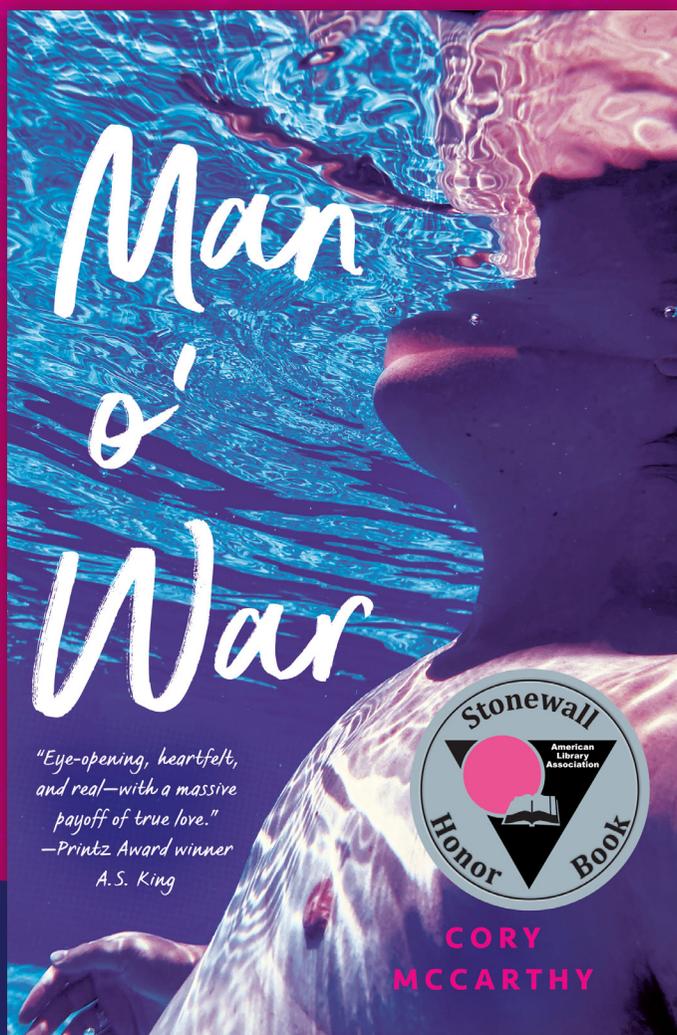


A DISCUSSION GUIDE TO



About the Book

An achingly honest and frequently hilarious coming-of-age novel about an Arab American trans swimmer fighting to keep their head above water in a landlocked Midwestern town.

Man o' wars are not jellyfish, and River McIntyre is not happy. River doesn't know why they're unhappy—though perhaps it has something to do with the way they relate more to captive marine life at the local aquarium than to the people around them. That is, until they have a run-in with Indigo "Indy" Waits on the annual class field trip. Face-to-face with an affirmed queer person, River leaps out of the closet and into the shark tank. Literally. What follows is a wrenching journey of self-discovery that spans years and winds through layers of coming out, transition, and top surgery, promising a free life for River with so much more than happiness: A life that's full of trans joy and true love.

"**Eye-opening, heartfelt**, and real—with a **massive payoff** of true love."

—A.S. KING, author of *Dig*, winner of the Michael L. Printz Award

"I loved the way this book explored the intersection between trans and mixed-race identity through a **deeply honest portrait** of how small-town life can constrict when you don't fit in. I wish it had existed when I was a teen grappling with my own identity."

—TEHLOR KAY MEJIA
for the *New York Times*

★ "A **beautiful and relentless** current of emotion."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

★ "A thoughtful, **nuanced exploration** of what it's like to feel trapped—and how to make it out."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, starred review

★ "McCarthy engages with every aspect of River's life to create an **extraordinary story** with incredible depth . . . [F]erociously resists the idea that coming out is a simple or straightforward process."

—BOOKPAGE, starred review

★ "Equal parts **heartbreaking and heartwarming**, this is a poignant, affirming story."

—SLJ, starred review

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Pre-Reading Exercise

Man o' War is a book about queer identity: coming to it, struggling with it, and, with the passage of time, growing to understand and joyfully embrace a new sense of self. The book depicts triumphant as well as painful moments for the main characters, and it will likely evoke a range of reactions in readers. For this reason, the novel begins with a content advisory. Readers need to know that the book contains depictions of gender dysphoria, internalized homophobia, self-harm, cissexism, and racism.

Some readers will be familiar with these experiences or will have personally lived them. For other readers, topics related to queer identity will be new. Consider what you as a reader are bringing to this text. What do you know about gender identity? What conversations are playing out in your community and in the national news media about trans people? Do you know any queer, trans, or nonbinary individuals? How might your knowledge, experience, and personal relationships shape the way you read this book and what you find in it?

- If you are a reader in search of background information about transgender people and trans history, start with “All the Only Ones,” a [3-part series](#) created in 2023 by the producers of the NPR podcast *Embedded*. Drawing on scholarly research as well as contemporary reporting, this series traces “the little known and often neglected history of trans youth in America.” Set in the context of a national wave of state-level anti-trans legislation, the series challenges the common idea that gender transition is new. Listeners will learn from a historian at Johns Hopkins University whose research in medical archives shows that young people were seeking what we now call gender affirming care a hundred years ago. Listeners will also hear the voices of trans youth today—voices that are too often missing in mainstream news reports.
- To hear an even wider range of first-person stories from the transgender community, explore the *New York Times* [collection](#) “Transgender Lives: Your Stories.” First published in 2015, the collection consists of short essays by transgender people of diverse ages, locations, and occupations. Some are high school and college students; others are retired. Most essays are paired with a photograph of the writer; a few are accompanied by a video testimonial that extends the writer’s story. As is the case with *Man o’ War*, some stories include references to self-harm, suicidal ideation, and despair. Others celebrate the process of gender transition, even in middle age. Together the stories depict the myriad ways in which trans people figure out who they are—and the relief they experience when they are able to live as their authentic selves.
- For more information about transgender people and media coverage of trans issues, explore the resources available through GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, which is a non-profit organization focused on LGBTQ advocacy and cultural change. GLAAD’s [Transgender Media Program](#) offers a rich array of resources that will serve both transgender people and their allies. These include Transgender FAQs, tips for becoming a better ally, links to transgender organizations, and a space for reporting defamation of transgender people in the media.
- All readers should be reminded of the line that ends *Man o’ War*’s content advisory: “The war is won with joy.” Why might McCarthy have chosen to end the content advisory with a statement about joy? How might reading the novel through this lens challenge you? How might it change you?

Discussion Topics

1. **A complex protagonist.** When we first meet River as a sophomore, they describe themselves as “teetering at the top of the social food chain” (p. 12). They are smart, sarcastic, and quick to destroy their bullies. However, hidden beneath their outward confidence is a deep well of pain. **As you get to know River, where do you see cracks in the armor of their bravado? How do they let on that they are not okay?**
2. **Representations of self-harm.** River engages in multiple acts of self-harm during their teen years, starting at the beginning of the novel when they dive into the shark tank at SeaPlanet (p. 27). Later we find out that they hit their head against the drywall in their bathroom until it cracked (p. 44), stabbed a pen into the back of their hand (p. 62), and jumped in front of a moving car at prom (p. 202). They also mention panic attacks and blackouts. As readers, we mostly learn about these events indirectly or after the fact. **Why might McCarthy have chosen to reveal the details of River’s trauma slowly, and over time, and mostly off the page?**
3. **River’s mother.** River’s mother takes up a lot of space in the novel. When we first meet her during River’s high school years, she is policing River’s food choices, hair style, and internet browser history. Later, when River’s understanding of their gender identity changes, she continues to call River “daughter,” and she does so on purpose, with the intent to wound. River and Everett distance themselves from her for their own self-preservation. And yet in certain moments, River regards their mother with compassion. We learn that she has considerable anxiety and her own complex history, shaped in part by anti-Arab prejudice after 9/11 that she refuses to speak about. When River ultimately decides that they are done with the relationship, even then it is a nuanced separation. “No matter what transpired between my mother and me, I would feel bad for her forever” (p. 264). **What do you make of the complexity of River’s relationship with their mother? Have you had similarly fraught relationships with family members in your life?**
4. **People who help River.** Several characters play important parts in River’s growth and transformation. River finds acceptance and sanctuary with the Chengs, an intellectual equal in Catherine, an ally in Electra, and a soulmate in Indy. Each of these characters helps River see things about themselves and reckon with new possibilities for their life and identity. **What does each character contribute to River’s growth and self-knowledge? Who else helps River, and how? Why does River need all of these people in their process of becoming?**

Discussion Topics (CONTINUED)

- 5. The power of language.** Language plays an important part in River's growth and identity development. When people call River by their deadname, or misgender them, language is invalidating. Sometimes language is threatening: "Trans is too political," River says. "I don't want to go anywhere near that word" (p. 175). At other times, language is clarifying and empowering, such as when Indy introduces River to the term *dinosaurs* ("It was nice to have a name for them when they so pointedly had a name for us" [p. 59]), when River learns the term *body dysphoria* ("The right words did that thing the right words always do: create a sense of communion" [p. 100]), and when River first identifies themselves to Catherine as nonbinary ("You make more sense now," Catherine says [p. 195]). **What choices do you see McCarthy making with language in this text? What role does language play in the story? Why is language so powerful?**
- 6. Identity as fluid, not fixed.** Indy changes pronouns regularly—on SeaPlanet name tags, on Instagram, in conversation. River is both puzzled and inspired by this fluidity: "Indy's gender was a mystery, one they seemed to fully enjoy. What was that dark magic?" (p. 157). Later, reflecting on Indy's use of pronouns, River thinks, "I'm starting to think that the change is more important to Indy than the words" (p. 288). As River's sense of gender identity evolves, they also change pronouns, first shifting to they/them, then considering the possibility of he/him. **What arguments is this novel making about gender and identity? How do River and Indy challenge or change your sense of how identity works?**
- 7. Reckoning with home.** SeaPlanet plays a huge role in River's life, and River's feelings about the place are contradictory. On the one hand, River critiques the company for the suffering of the animals held there in captivity; on the other hand, SeaPlanet is the setting for some of the most formative events in River's life. It's a site they hold onto with complex appreciation: "In the end, SeaPlanet had a lot of marks against it, but it had also been an island of note in landlocked meaningless . . . I could have been working at Target or wandering a strip mall during these years. Instead I'd made a second home at SeaPlanet" (p. 288–289). River holds similar conflicted feelings about Ohio. They feel smothered and held hostage there, and yet when they are finally old enough to leave, they say that Ohio is going to stay with them forever, "and maybe it was time to make peace with that" (p. 281). **How have you been shaped by the places where you've spent your growing-up years? How have those places enriched you? How have they held you back?**
- 8. The long process of becoming.** *Man o' War* is unusual for a YA novel in that it follows the main character from adolescence through college and beyond. At one point, River reflects on the magnitude of change and the strange way humans experience time: "It was a hundred lifetimes ago. And also yesterday" (p. 288). **What do you notice about the ways McCarthy depicts River's growth? Why do we need to see River through this many years? How does the architecture of the book—its sections and time jumps—contribute to the authenticity of River's growth and change?**

Discussion Topics (CONTINUED)

- The book's overall project.** The best works of literature do more than tell a story. They accomplish larger aims, which may involve grappling with a difficult issue, taking a position on an important topic, critiquing society, or illuminating some aspect of the human experience. Cory McCarthy does all of these things in *Man o' War*, using the story as a vehicle to offer up commentary on coaches, therapists, abusers and predators; to critique standard ways of thinking about the Midwest, whiteness, and the coming out process; to reflect deeply on life in captivity. A recurring line in the book is "be gay, do crime" (p. 147, 148, 206, 250). **How does this line connect to the book's overall project? What would you say McCarthy tried to accomplish in writing this novel?**
- Advice for living.** *Man o' War* ends with two afterwords, one written "for trans, queer, and questioning folk" and the other "for dinosaurs." On these pages, McCarthy steps out of their role as novelist and speaks as a human to other humans, offering love, critique, instruction, and advice. **What do these sections do to enrich the book's overall project? How do they nod to the various audiences who may read this book? How do they offer an additional set of possible takeaways for all of the book's possible readers? What do these sections do for you?**

Extension Activities

- On the rights of trans youth.** What do you know about laws and policies in your local community regarding gender affirming medical care, trans and nonbinary students' ability to access gender inclusive locker rooms and bathrooms, and trans youth participation in high school and college sports? Choose one or more of these topics and research the policy landscape in your area. Find out about the treatment options being provided to trans youth in local hospitals and medical clinics. Read up on policies being debated at area school board meetings related to trans youth, bathrooms, and sports teams. Are there lawsuits playing out in your community related to these issues? Who are the stakeholders? What is the history? What happens when we reframe "trans rights" as "human rights"?
- On whiteness and racism.** *Man o' War* has many things to say about race, racism, racial identity development, and whiteness. We live in a society where conversation about race has often been labeled as impolite. Now we are seeing the enactment of what PEN America calls "educational gag orders," which are state legislative efforts to restrict teaching about topics such as race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ+ identities in K-12 and higher education. What do you know about racial identity development, intersectionality, and whiteness? Take a look at Tema Okun's [website](#) on White Supremacy Culture. Watch Kimberle Crenshaw explain intersectionality in this [video](#). Spend some time writing about your own racial identity. When was the first time you noticed race? What messages have you been given about your ethnic culture and what it means to be "American"? What might you need to unlearn?

Extension Activities (CONTINUED)

- **On metaphors.** Cory McCarthy describes *Man o' War* as a novel about growing up in captivity. Recurring references to sea creatures, tanks, and cages communicate and illuminate River's emotional struggle and process of forging a new identity. What metaphors can you come up with to illuminate other big ideas in the novel? For example, what object, item, or image could work as a metaphor to communicate the complexity of topics such as: wrestling with racial identity and the struggle to reconcile tensions and dilemmas related to race; grappling with the flaws and problems of society and what to do about it; recognizing society's rules and deciding when it's necessary to break them; reckoning with the past (past history, past trauma) and figuring out how to separate oneself from the past and move on. Once you choose an object, start with literal connections, and then move on to write or explain its symbolic meanings. Finally, step back and evaluate: Why is the object/idea you've chosen important to the book? To you?

Suggestions for Further Exploration

Check out the following resources to deepen your thinking and further your experience with *Man o' War*.

- For more experience of River's world, listen to the *Man o' War* audiobook narrated by E. R. Fightmaster. Also read "Museum of Misery," Cory McCarthy's visual short story in *The Collectors*, edited by A.S. King (Dutton, 2022). Then listen to the audiobook version. Listen to it again. And again.
- For more information about SeaWorld and more insight into the experience of animals living in captivity, visit the [website](#) *SeaWorld of Hurt: Where Happiness Tanks*. Also watch the documentary movie *Blackfish* (Magnolia Pictures, 2013), and read the companion nonfiction book *Beneath the Surface: Killer Whales, SeaWorld, and the Truth Beyond Blackfish* by John Hargrove with Howard Chua-Eoan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- For deeper insight into pronouns, the history of nonbinary identity, and the nuances of gender expression, read the book *How to They/Them: A Visual Guide to Nonbinary Pronouns and the World of Gender Fluidity* by Stuart Getty (Sasquatch Books, 2020).
- For additional experience with the stories of trans people, and for information about the experience of a trans swimmer at Harvard, read *He/She/They: How We Talk About Gender and Why It Matters* by Schuyler Bailar (Hachette Go, 2023).

