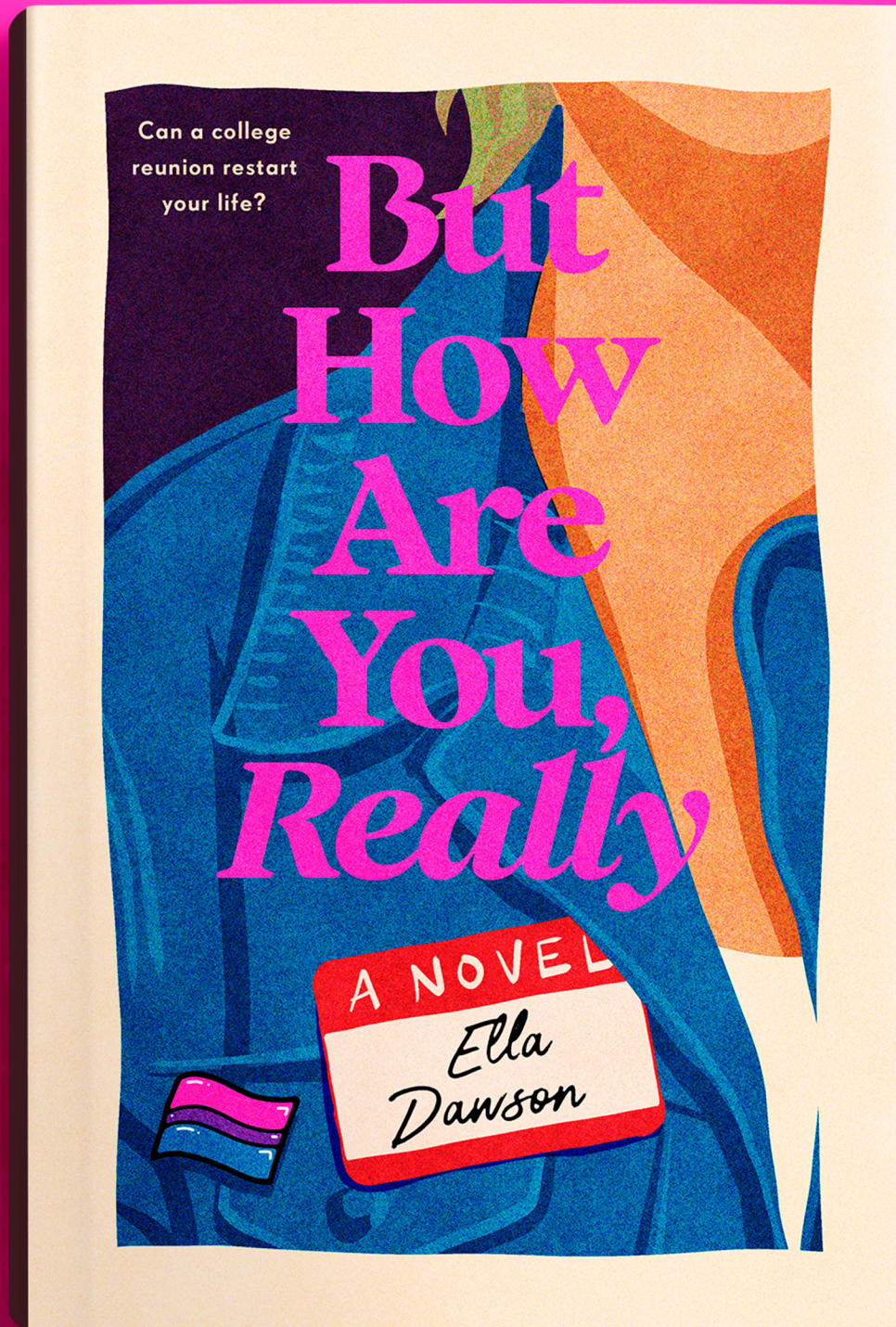


Book Club Kit



DUTTON

Dear Reader,

I didn't expect my first book to be a novel, but Charlotte and Reece's story came to me in a flash on the last day of my college reunion in 2019. Reunions are emotionally heightened settings, fuzzy with nostalgia but fraught with small talk and insecurity. For me, my five-year reunion was an opportunity to temporarily escape my stressful job and a controlling boyfriend. I sat on Foss Hill with old dormmates and exes, trading updates on our lives and careers and struggles. No one had become who they expected to be, but everyone had a wild story to tell.

On the final morning of the reunion, I had this image of two former lovers who knew each other as kids staring each other down many years later as older, not quite wiser, adults. Charlotte and Reece have had a rough go of it since graduating from college. Charlotte is depressed, estranged from her parents, and working as an assistant to a narcissistic thought leader. Reece, newly sober, lives with his mom as he pays off student loans and tries to get his act together. At their five-year reunion, they're embarrassed that they can't compete with their hyper-successful classmates, but they find understanding in each other. They're both working on themselves, determined to break free from generational traumas and redefine what love and success look like.

As a queer millennial and a survivor of relationship abuse, I tried to write a happily ever after that felt honest and true to my generation's complicated relationship with the future. *But How Are You, Really* feels like my happy ending. It gave me the strength to leave a bad relationship, reconnect with the outspoken girl I was in college, and find my voice again.

In a weird quirk of timing, *But How Are You, Really* will arrive in bookstores on June 4, a few days after my ten-year reunion. I hope Charlotte's story will help other broke millennials and isolated abuse survivors feel seen and loved.

Ella Dawson

Discussion Questions

1. Returning to Hein University in many ways feels like slipping back into a moment in time for Charlotte—dance parties, a twin XL bed. Did reading *But How Are You, Really* conjure personal college memories for you or a moment when you also entered a time capsule?
2. The color wheel of emotion is a subtle theme throughout the book. What colors would you use to describe the feeling of reading this book?
3. Throughout the novel, Charlotte often shares details about the tumultuous relationship she has with her mother, meanwhile expressing how much love and appreciation she has for her friends. Discuss the novel's impactful message about the importance of "chosen family."
4. One of the realizations Charlotte has over the course of her weekend back at Hein is how isolated she has become, living in an apartment by herself in New York City and working at a place where she's siloed into interacting mostly with her terrible boss. How much does reuniting with her queer chosen family affect her and how she wants to change moving forward? Do you think Charlotte's experience—leaving a close-knit community behind upon entering the workforce postcollege—is a common one? In what ways is our society set up to be isolating by nature?
5. At its core, *But How Are You, Really* is a beautiful story about a second chance at love. Describe the ways in which Reece shows support and acceptance for Charlotte and her identity.

Discussion Questions

6. In the novel, Charlotte reflects that, “queer college discos were a special kind of miracle, free and safe and innocent. . . She didn’t need to vouch for her bisexuality; no one counted gold stars here.” (p. 126) How does the novel explore bisexuality through Charlotte’s relationships, both romantic and platonic? How does returning to college prompt her to reflect on her queerness?
7. Charlotte acknowledges that “She still struggled not to blame herself for falling for Ben. The scar tissue of their relationship would take years to heal, no matter how many books she read about love-bombing and gaslighting.” (p. 207) In what ways do we see Charlotte blame herself and push people away because of Ben’s—and her mother’s—emotional abuse? In what ways do we see her beginning to forgive herself?
8. There are so many relationships in this novel, both romantic and platonic. Describe your favorite one and why.
9. In romance novels, happily ever afters are expected. *But How Are You, Really* steps outside of this genre and calls into question what a happily ever after might look like for Charlotte, her queer friends, survivors, and other millennials living in today’s world. How might happily ever after look different from what we may have expected—for the characters and for yourself?