

Gracefully



Grayson

a novel by Ami Polonsky

DISCUSSION GUIDE

HYPERION BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

When Grayson was four years old, his parents were killed in a car accident and Grayson moved in with uncle Evan, aunt Sally, and his cousins Jack and Brett. Now, seven years later, Grayson has given up trying to fit in at school or at home. Grayson doesn't have any friends and is terribly lonely. Cousin Jack, one year older, harasses Grayson for his feminine ways at home and at school.

Only when Grayson is alone in his room with his secret does he feel any peace. There he can close his eyes and imagine he is wearing a long, flowing skirt—because in his heart Grayson knows he is a she.

At school, Grayson has one class that she finds engaging: Humanities with Mr. Finnegan—or Finn, as most students call him. Finn is also the director of the school drama program and this year's play, the Greek myth of Persephone. When Grayson's name is called to audition, she bravely decides to read for the part of Persephone, daughter of Demeter. Her audition is amazing.

Finn decides and Grayson gets the part, but not everyone is as excited as Grayson.

COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

This guide is aligned with the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCR) for Reading in the areas of Literature, Writing, and Language. The broad CCR standards are the foundation for the grade level–specific Common Core State Standards. All the activities in this guide align with the following:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.3, CCSS ELA-Literacy.6.5, CCSS ELA-Literacy.6.6, CCSS ELA-Literacy.6.7, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.6.9, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.6.10. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.2, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.3, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.4, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.5, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.7, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.10.

SUMMARY OF THE GREEK MYTH OF PERSEPHONE

The story of Persephone plays a large role in Gracefully Grayson. You may want to have students read the myth in conjunction with the book.

Hades fell in love with the maiden Core, later known as Persephone, and asked his younger brother Zeus to be allowed to marry her. When Zeus refused to step between his brother and Demeter, Persephone's mother and their sister, Hades, in his anger, captured Persephone and took her to his Underworld.

For nine days Demeter neither ate nor drank anything as she searched for Persephone. As she was goddess of the cornfield, her weakened state spread through the fields and forests. Zeus had to do something to end the drought that Demeter's sadness had caused, so he convinced Demeter and Hades that they could share Persephone as long as Persephone had not tasted the food of the dead in the Underworld. They agreed, but as Persephone was about to return to her mother, one of Hades's gardeners told that he had seen her eat seven seeds from a pomegranate. Another agreement was reached with the help of Rhea, mother of Zeus, Hades, and Demeter: Persephone would spend the three winter months of each year in the Underworld with Hades, and the rest of the year with her mother.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

On page 199, there is the following quote. Discuss it, and then, as you read through the book, record all details that develop this theme.

"Well, what if we got assigned to debate something we don't agree with?"

Finn looks at Sebastian with heavy eyes, and finally, his face softens. "Something I believe in," he says, looking around the room, "is that it builds character to stand in someone else's shoes. You know, to try to see things from another perspective."

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION OR WRITING

- 1 Citing from the text, identify the details that the author uses to develop the following themes:
 - Loneliness and loss
 - Alienation or acceptance
 - Family
 - Pretending—reality—pretending becoming reality
- 2 Using examples from your own life and from the text, define what makes a “good mother”; then discuss the following mother images in *Gracefully Grayson*, comparing each to your stated definition:
 - Grayson’s mother
 - Grayson’s aunt
 - Demeter
 - Paige (who plays Demeter)
- 3 Aunt Sally and Uncle Evan have opposing views when it comes to Grayson playing the part of Persephone in the school play. Citing from the text, explain their individual perspectives. How are both their positions created out of love for Grayson? Do they each keep the focus on Grayson? Whom do you agree with and why?
- 4 Identify the one character in the book most like you, and explain how you and this character are similar, or have been similar in the past. Evaluate with examples from your life if you are satisfied with this role. Has this story changed any of your self-perceptions and/or behaviors? If so, which ones?
- 5 Grayson’s aunt and uncle give Grayson an envelope containing cards, written by his mother, that his grandmother saved for him. Explain how Grayson feels after reading them. Use these two quotes to get started, and then cite other evidence from the text that shows how his memories keep revealing more to him.
 - *I put the pictures next to me. The air feels too thick. I want to read the other letters before I look at them again. Mom chose them. I want to save how she saw me for last. (p. 102)*
 - *I close my eyes now, and I let the memory come to me—the only whole and complete one that I’ve kept from my first life. I let it float out of the velvet-lined box where I’ve kept it, locked carefully in my mind. (p. 106)*

- 6 In Grayson's room, there is a painting that Grayson often refers to. Describe the painting and analyze how the author uses this painting to illustrate Grayson's self-awareness and his relationship with his mother.
- 7 Ami Polonsky is a master at the craft of writing; many times in this book she places Grayson in difficult situations. Explain the significance of the passage at the end of page 188.
- What do you think is Polonsky's reason for choosing this figurative language, this vision, at this point in the text?
 - What does Grayson realize from her dream of the Grand Canyon?
 - What does the funnel in the swirling cloud stand for, and what does the image of herself in that cloud mean to her?
 - How does Polonsky's use of imagery help the reader understand the chaos of Grayson's life?
- 8 There are many documented cases of people being born without fingers, toes, arms or legs, or conjoined with another human, or having two hearts or a missing or extra chromosome. Why is it so difficult for humans to accept that someone's gender label could be incorrect? Before answering, consider the following quote from the end of the book:
- Ms. Landen helps me step into my golden gown for Act One. And even though Finn is leaving because of it, and even though Aunt Sally thinks I'm a monster, when I look at myself in the giant, floor-to-ceiling mirrors, I finally see myself the way I'm supposed to be—my inside self matched up with my outside self. And now, everyone else will finally see it, too. (p. 214).*
- 9 "Well, I think to be brave, you have to be scared at the same time. To be brave means there's something important you have to do and you're scared, but you do it anyway." (p. 234).
- Considering the above definition for the word brave, identify five characters in this novel who have been brave and explain their situations.
 - Discuss a time when you have been as brave as these characters or wish you were.

POST-READING ASSIGNMENT

- 1 Shakespeare wrote:

Polonius:

*This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
—Hamlet, act 1, scene 3, lines 78–80*

Identify and discuss characters in *Gracefully Grayson* who are true to themselves, who are not true to themselves, or who change in the course of the book to become true to themselves. Then tie this assignment to the pre-reading assignment.

RELATED PROJECTS

- 1 Research how transgender individuals in our world have been treated in the past and are treated in modern time.
- 2 Research another group in history or in the world that has suffered discrimination. How has that group's experience been similar to the discrimination that Grayson suffers?
- 3 Research how people's memory works and why memories linger in the subconscious, and how material objects can trigger memories.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ami Polonsky (amipolonsky.com) is a reading and writing tutor, mother to two young children, and author, among other things. A former Language Arts teacher and literacy coach, Ami remains passionate about guiding children toward a love of books and helping create lifetime readers. Ami lives outside Chicago with her family. This is her first novel.



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Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

1 Why did you make Grayson twelve years old?

At twelve, who you are and who you want to become are crystallizing. It's an age when anything is possible, because you're right on the brink of young adulthood. At twelve, there's an understanding that you're going to make big choices in your life, and you're going to make them soon—but you still have a little time to make sure that your choices are going to be *good* ones. Generally speaking, the form that this transition into young adulthood takes begins with avenues explored during the middle-grade years. I made Grayson twelve so she'd be savvy enough to make a good decision about how to present herself to the world, but the book needed to catch her just before that decision was made.

2 Your use of the pronoun *she* for Grayson is important and creates a much-needed teachable moment. There are times in the book when Grayson's uncle calls her "son" and Grayson winces. Readers may not understand. Please explain.

For much of the book, Grayson is trapped in a very difficult position—she wants to be seen for who she truly is, but she can't figure out how to tell her truth. When Uncle Evan calls Grayson "son," he's showing love and affection—Uncle Evan is an extremely loving man. But he's getting the core of Grayson completely *wrong*, which is why she flinches. For most people, gender identity is a huge and basic component of overall identity. It would be very disconcerting to anyone to be misconstrued on such a core level—now couple that with not feeling able to correct those who have misunderstood you. This would feel incredibly dehumanizing. As a general rule, if you're ever unsure of which pronoun to use in referring to a transgender person, with kindness and respect, you should ask them.

- 3 The book is set in middle school, the time when bullying and harassment peak. Many—perhaps most—teachers avoid dealing with bullying, and certainly gender diversity. What would you like to say to teachers to encourage them to use this book?

I taught middle-school Language Arts for many years. I quickly learned that the greatest antidote to cruelty was teaching children to put themselves into other people's shoes. In my classroom, through our discussions of novels, we talked relentlessly about what we would do if we were in a character's place. How would we feel? What experiences from our own lives could we use to help us better understand a character's risks, decisions, failures, and triumphs? What I would like to say to teachers is this: Use discussions about *Gracefully Grayson* and many other books to help middle schoolers embrace diversity. Showing students how to relate to fictional characters is the most genuine and lasting way to teach empathy.

- 4 Some people will say that this could never happen in a 6–8 building—the gender-diverse student, the play, the acceptance.

I have actually seen all these things happen in a 6–8 building. Gender-diverse students are everywhere. Whether they feel free to express who they are, whether a school has a great drama club, and whether students are accepting are all dependent upon a school's climate. It's the job of the adults—the teachers and the administration—to create schools that embrace diversity. It is the job of the adults to provide opportunities for students to explore the arts, and it is the job of the adults to teach students to think about how it might feel to be someone else.

- 5 At a time when diversity is lacking in YA literature, you chose not to include many culturally diverse characters. How would this book have changed if you had included more children from other cultures?

The word “chose” is an interesting one, because it raises the question: How do writers create characters? All the characters in *Gracefully Grayson* came to me fully formed. They feel like my own children—especially Grayson—and they came to life somewhere in my subconscious mind. Creating them didn't *feel* like a conscious choice, but as a writer, especially of literature for children, it's dangerous for me to absolve myself of responsibility to the culturally diverse readers who deserve to see themselves reflected in books.

Meagan is Asian, and I enjoyed creating a strong Asian girl in the same way that I enjoyed creating the other brave characters in *Gracefully Grayson*. It certainly wasn't hard for me to write Meagan as Asian, so should more of the characters in *Gracefully Grayson* have been non white? Maybe. Your question begs me to ask: As a writer of children's literature, what is my responsibility? Is it exclusively to tell a good story? Is my responsibility to reflect a story's future readers? I think that the answer probably lies somewhere in between.

- 6 The following quote is taken from the end of the book, when Finn's replacement, Mrs. LaBelle, asks, "What do you all believe the author was trying to tell us about bravery?" Sebastian raises his hand and says, "Well, I think to be brave, you have to be scared at the same time. To be brave means there's something important you have to do and you're scared but you do it anyway." (p. 234). Was this book an act of bravery for you?

Writing a book and putting it out into the world is kind of like standing naked in front of a crowd of people you don't know. A book is a reflection of an author's subconscious mind, and it includes raw, unmasked emotion. Anytime someone puts her true self out into the world and invites judgment, she's taking a risk, so in this regard, all authors are probably brave. The fact that my main character is transgender doesn't make me braver than anyone else who is expressing her individual perceptions and true beliefs to the world. There was something important that I needed to do, and that was to tell Grayson's story. While I do feel exposed, I'm not scared because my story features a transgender girl. Writing about someone's struggle to be true to herself is not risky in and of itself—it's simply what makes a good story.

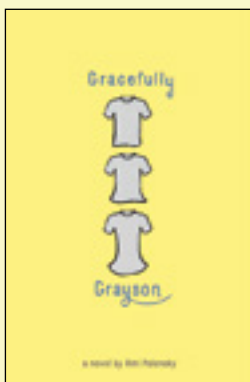
- 7 For many authors, the first book is truly a work of love; the beginning idea that has grown in the author's imagination, the nurturing of the story happens much like a parent would nurture a child: tenderly looking at each word, phrase, page to be sure it is perfect, cautiously offering the book to someone to read. *Gracefully Grayson* reads like that, a work nurtured with love. Second books are often a contracted commitment. How will you follow this first book?

You're right—"growing" Grayson felt similar to loving and nurturing my two (real, live) children. I wrote *Gracefully Grayson* when my children were very young, and I'm quite sure that without experiencing motherhood, I wouldn't have been emotionally vulnerable enough to create Grayson.

My second novel is about completely different characters in completely different situations. Thus far, writing it feels similar to writing *Gracefully Grayson*, and I'm hopeful that this current writing experience will produce another "work of love." I am purposely taking my time with it so that I'm able to nurture it the way it needs to be nurtured. If I begin to feel emotionally untethered from the two main characters in the book, I remind myself to think of them as my children. Doing so reawakens an intense desire for them to grow into clear-headed, self-actualized young adults, and it reminds me to provide them with the experiences, challenging as they may be, that will allow them to do so.

This guide was written by C. J. Bott, a former high school English teacher who is now an educational consultant on issues of bullying and harassment, focusing on prevention. She believes that reading books that deal with harassment is the best way to help our young students see the injustice of judging others. Bott was the 2012 ALAN president and is the author of two books, *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* (Scarecrow Press, 2004) and *More Bullies in More Books* (Scarecrow Press, 2009), and a recipient of the 2003 NCTE/SLATE Intellectual Freedom Award. More information can be found on her website, bulliesinbooks.com.

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