

Reading Guide:
Discussion Questions and
an Interview with Chloe Caldwell

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ♦ You could call *I'll Tell You in Person* a coming-of-adulthood book—parents split up, friendships and jobs come and go, addictions morph from Tic-Tacs to heroin and back again. It's also a book of essays, not a memoir. How does that choice change your experience of the book? What do essays offer that memoir doesn't, and vice versa?
- ♦ How important is it to see the narrator change over the course of the book? Chloe's candor and willingness to admit to missteps is a big part of what people love about her writing—what does it mean for her to evolve as a character without ever perfecting herself?
- ♦ Friendships are perhaps the most passionate relationships in the book—what does it mean for a young woman to focus her attachments on her friends, not potential romantic partners? How does *I'll Tell You in Person* relate to other stories of young women in that way?
- ♦ Movies, music, magazines, and books—culture (pop and otherwise) is the backdrop for so many of the essays in *I'll Tell You in Person*. How did having *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* overlap with a story of the author's uncle, or the Magnetic Fields providing a backdrop for her friendship with another writer, add texture to the essays? Did they create a connection for you? Did they tell you something you wouldn't have known otherwise?

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHLOE CALDWELL

Choosing the order of essays in a collection like this seems difficult! How did you choose what order to put them in? Did you move them around a lot?

Breaking the book up into three sections was an idea from the very beginning, but the themes and order of those sections went through a good amount of strife, until finally the order felt “right” to my editors and me. Chronological order would have been the easiest, but it didn’t feel right, so we had room to play with it. I would send the manuscript to my editors having changed the arrangement, and then the editors would change it and send it back to me, and so on, until the order fell into place and we stopped touching it. I thought simultaneously about juxtaposition and underlying themes for the grouping. For example, the first essay was the *last* essay, and something about that wasn’t working out, so I revamped it, and just thinking of it as an introduction of sorts guided me while I reworked it. The sections also went through many title ideas, but in the end I didn’t want to label them. Sequence is so important—just think about mix CDs.

A lot of the essays touch on the theme of what being a writer, especially one who often publishes close-to-the-bone first-person work, does to your life. How are you feeling about that stuff as this book nears publication?

Depends on the day. Ask me at night after I’ve smoked a little pot and I’ll be so paranoid I’ll decide to move to Alaska, dye my hair, and never publish again. Ask me over morning coffee and I’ll be hypomanic with how much I love my unconventional lifestyle. At the end of the day, though, regardless of the substances I ingest, I am unspeakably grateful that I have the privilege of doing what I love. If I weren’t writing, I’d be a very unhappy person. If I weren’t publishing, I wouldn’t have a chance to connect with people—readers and writers especially—on a deep level. And I wouldn’t get to travel nearly as much! Writing and publishing give my life meaning and direction. Keeps me off the streets.

Which of these essays is your favorite, and why?

"Hungry Ghost" was the most fun to write. I laughed a bunch while writing it, which is always a good sign, and the first few drafts flowed out naturally, without force. I never dreaded editing it like I did with some of the other essays. I enjoyed writing "Failing Singing" because quitting and giving up a talent was a subject I'd always wanted to explore, and also the first essay, "In Real Life," because forewords allow you to basically put a huge disclaimer in your book, like, "I know I'm fucked up! I never said I wasn't! My book is imperfect!" I also have a soft spot for "Soul Killer" because it shines a light on gray-area addiction, something I think is important to talk about. My friend calls that essay the gift that keeps on giving, because after putting something like that into the world, there is nowhere to hide.

Which one was the hardest to write, and why?

"The Music and the Boys." I hadn't thought about that phase of my life for at least fifteen years. I was forced to do substantial investigation—emotional accuracy was profoundly important to me. I had both my mom and the main character read early versions and they both helped me fact-check and reminded me of incidents I'd forgotten. When I drafted that essay at a residency, I threw my back out and had to go get a massage. What's that New Agey quote, the body remembers what the mind forgets? The essay about Berlin felt bleak to write at times. It gets to be a bummer sitting at your desk for hours a day, especially in winter, writing and reliving anxiety and depression, trying to make it entertaining.

How did you come up with the title for the book?

I was texting the phrase to people constantly. Because I've lived in various cities, my close girlfriends are scattered all over, and I was getting frustrated with talking on the phone and texting and liked to save up whatever anecdotes I wanted to share with them for the next time I saw them in real life. A couple friends

told me it was getting annoying—“You’re too into this ‘in person’ thing!”—so I eventually tried it out for my manuscript. I’ve always enjoyed essay collection titles like Sloane Crosley’s *How Did You Get This Number* and Jonathan Ames’s *What’s Not to Love?* because they get to have quirky and conversational titles; they don’t have to be super serious. It’s funny because my other books went through many title ideas and changes, but with *I’ll Tell You in Person*, no editors or friends or agents suggested a change or mentioned it at all. It stuck.

What books did you read while you were putting together this collection? Anything that especially spoke to you or influenced your process?

Violation by Sallie Tisdale, *Tiny Ladies in Shiny Pants* by Jill Soloway, *The Boys of My Youth* by Jo Ann Beard, *I’m Special: And Other Lies We Tell Ourselves* by Ryan O’Connell, *How to Grow Up* by Michelle Tea, *What’s Not to Love?* and *The Double Life Is Twice as Good* by Jonathan Ames, *The Unspeakable: And Other Subjects of Discussion* and *My Misspent Youth* by Meghan Daum, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott, *Let’s Explore Diabetes with Owls* by David Sedaris, *Chelsea Girls* by Eileen Myles, and *When the Sick Rule the World* by Dodie Bellamy.

Reading essay collections while writing one is truly the best way to cope with feeling like a freak. You’re like, “At least I didn’t shit my pants in the South of France!” In my mind, I throw these essay writers under the bus with me, and keeping their books in bed with me helps me sleep at night, the way stuffed animals used to.