

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. *Little Panic* takes place in two narrative moments: when Amanda is a young child growing up in lower Manhattan, and when she is facing down adult relationships and larger life choices. In both cases, she seems to be craving one thing: a family. Discuss the different kinds of families she finds, or loses, over the course of the book. Do you agree with her choices?
2. In Chapter 2, Stern describes feeling as if she is “not the right kind of human.” What does she mean by this? Do you agree that there is such a thing as a “right” way to be human?
3. Amanda’s life is interwoven in unexpected ways with the famous missing child case that rocked New York City in the 1970s, the disappearance of Etan Patz. Discuss the impact that Etan’s abduction had on her Greenwich Village neighborhood, and on Amanda herself?
4. Stern’s narrative offers a vivid picture of the world through young Amanda’s child-eyes—especially about how she can trust the world, and the laws of physics, to operate. How does this narrative choice, to keep readers inside Amanda’s head, affect your experience of the book? Do you agree or disagree with these choices? How would this have been a different book if Stern chose to narrate fully from her more measured, adult perspective?
5. Amanda’s mother responds to her fears by offering constant reassurance that “bad things don’t happen to children.” Do you think this was the right approach, or is there something she—and other authority figures in Amanda’s life—could have done differently? What would you do as a parent in this situation?
6. Amanda struggles with her own desire to become a parent. What important lessons does she learn from her own life that help shape her decisions by the end of the memoir?
7. One of Amanda’s greatest sources of panic is that the people she loves will disappear. Talk about how her experiences with Melissa and Baba impact her. Do you see any echoes of this worry in her adult relationships?
8. One of the later chapters in the book is titled “A Word Never Means Only One Thing.” What do you think the author means by this?
9. Did the experience of reading *Little Panic* and getting to know Amanda change your perspective on mental health treatment at all? Why or why not?

Q & A with Amanda Stern

You've had a successful career as a novelist and children's book author. What inspired you to write a memoir? And why now?

I spent a decade avoiding this book. Instead, I wrote a novel about intelligence testing, but it was missing something. So I wrote another book and another and another. Four manuscripts, all unpublished, were dancing wildly around a missing topic: anxiety. This book began as a way to let the panic out, but it soon became my sole focus, and I decided to dedicate myself to the project. The process was incredibly painful, although ultimately rewarding.

The theme of standardized testing is one that comes up again and again in the memoir; you talk powerfully about how those tests affected your sense of yourself and your place in the world. Is there a lesson here for parents and educators? What would you want them to take away from this perspective?

We come in all styles, and measuring the vast array of people with a one-size-fits-all model is counterintuitive. One size does not actually "fit all." *All* means everyone. Think of every single person you meet in a day, in a week, or in a year. And imagine asking each of them the exact same questions. Their responses would be wildly different from one another, and impossible to score using one set of criteria. It's a flawed system and it needs to be completely revamped. Tests are an accurate measure of a person's comfort level in an artificial environment, not of what they know.

I really applaud the parents who are opting out of testing. What we need are more options. We can't customize the tests to each student, but we can customize the environments and the methods by which the tests are administered.

What would you want to say to yourself, if you could go back now and talk to the little girl you were?

I would tell myself to be really brave and talk to a teacher, tell her all of my symptoms, and say I needed someone to talk me through all my what-ifs.

It's evident that 1970s and '80s New York City is very much a character in your story. Are you still a New Yorker? How would you say the city has changed? How has it stayed the same?

I am still very much a New Yorker, geographically and psychologically, although SO MUCH has changed. All my beloved haunts are gone, the landmarks of my youth; the mom-and-popness of the landscape has also vanished. I've been in Brooklyn for fifteen years now and what's most noticeable to me is the absence of multigenerations. I grew up surrounded by people of all ages, and I was friends with the people I liked. It didn't matter if they were a decade older or younger. There's a very specific energy to having three generations in a neighborhood, and I can't find it anymore. What's the same? The sky?

You go on so many different emotional journeys throughout the book, as a child and as a woman. Can you say a little bit about where you are now in your life?

I still have anxiety, but I am better able to manage it. What's helped me (outside of medication and regular therapy) has been my decision to be completely transparent about my struggles. I've been able to do that because of the accumulation of people who, over the past ten years, have confided in me about their vulnerabilities. Once I realized what plagued me was universal, it's just that mine is severe, it helped me relax a little bit more into the world. My dog Busy and I live very happily in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, two blocks from my brother Eddie, and surrounded by friends. I am dating on and off (mostly off) and mulling over the idea of living in another state, or country, for a year.

What are you working on next?

I'm not quite sure. Either a book of speculative fiction or a collection of humor essays. Or something else entirely that hasn't occurred to me. Although I do have four unpublished manuscripts on a hard drive somewhere...