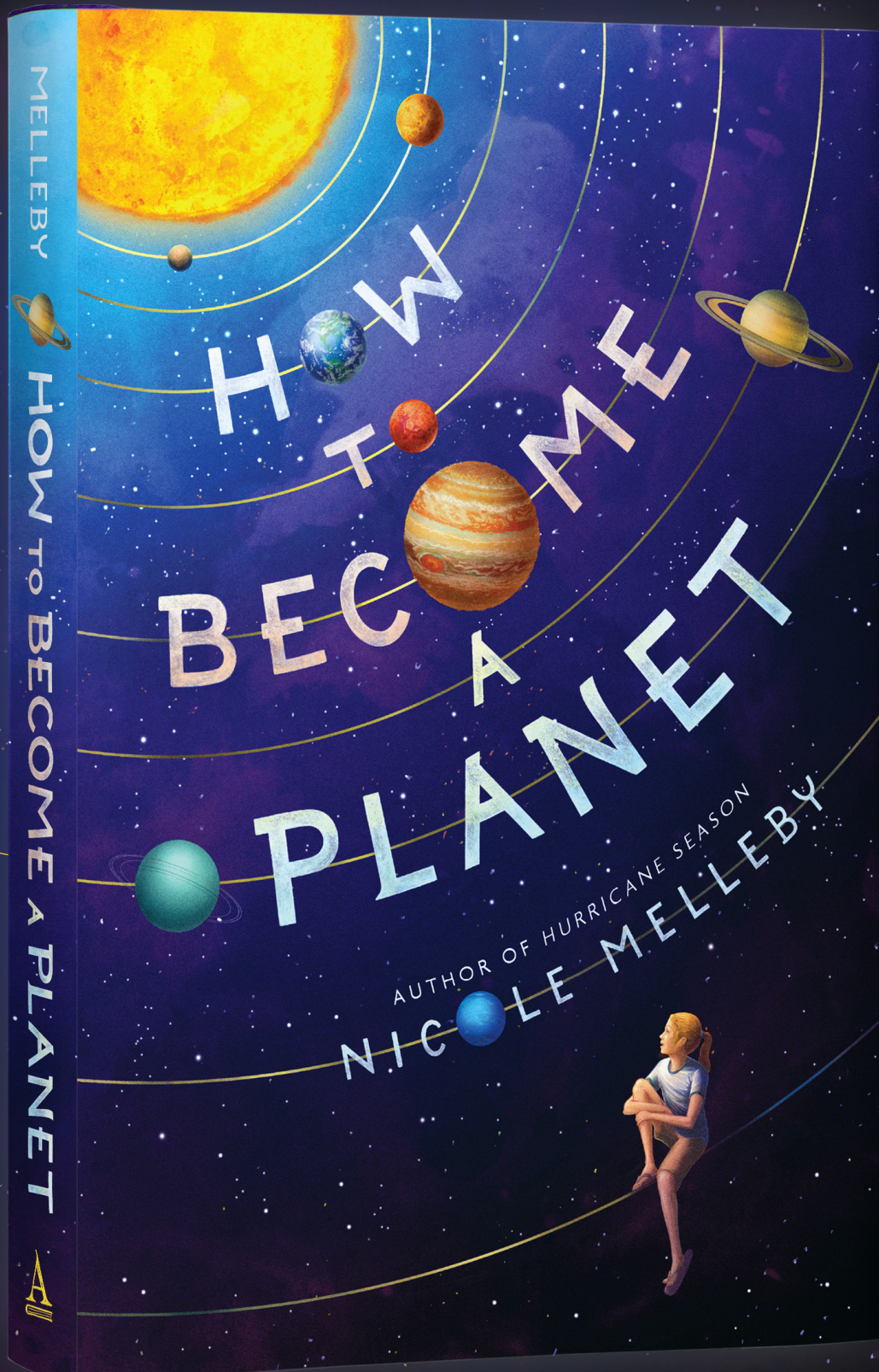




DISCUSSION GUIDE



MELLEBY

HOW TO BECOME A PLANET

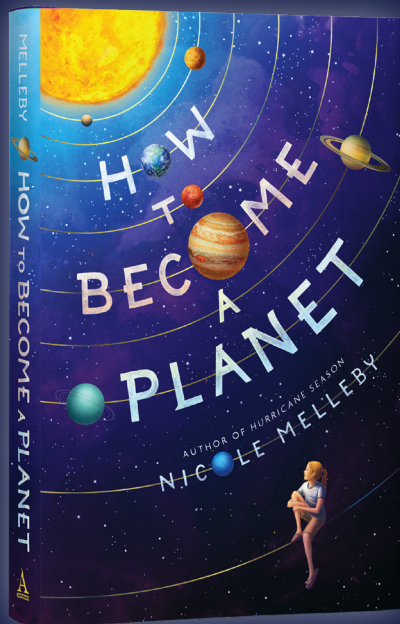


HOW TO BECOME A PLANET

AUTHOR OF HURRICANE SEASON

NICOLE MELLEBY





HC ISBN: 9781643750361 / \$16.95

EBOOK ISBN: 9781643751627 / \$15.95

AUDIOBOOK ISBN: 9781649040305 / \$20.95

BOOK DESCRIPTION

Nicole Melleby is back with her third novel, *How to Become a Planet*. Summer is Pluto's favorite season. It always begins with a trip to the planetarium and is filled with visits to the boardwalk arcade, working in her mom's pizzeria, and celebrating her best friend's birthday. But this year is different. After an entire summer trying to figure out how to go back to being the person she was before her depression and anxiety diagnosis, Pluto finds out—with the help of a new therapist, a new tutor, and a new (cute) friend—that there is no old or new Pluto, there's just Pluto, growing up. Nicole's previous books, *Hurricane Season* and *In the Role of Brie Hutchens...* are available now.

★ “A raw yet honest portrayal of a young person's experience with depression, this is a must-read for both middle grade readers and the teachers, counselors, parents, and other adults who interact daily with youth undergoing similar experiences.”

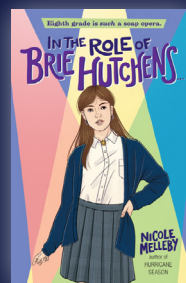
—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL, STARRED REVIEW

“Lambda Literary Awards finalist Melleby tackles the gravitational force of the youth mental health crisis . . . Readers will find insight and compassion around setting realistic goals and navigating results that may not match initial expectations . . . A realistic, hopeful account of personal recovery and discovery.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS



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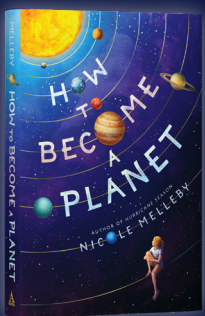
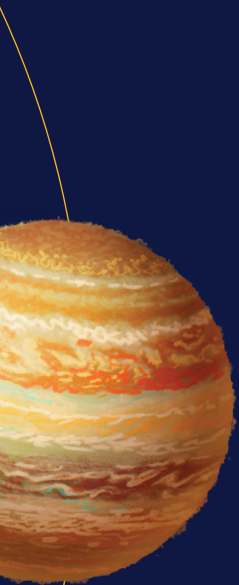
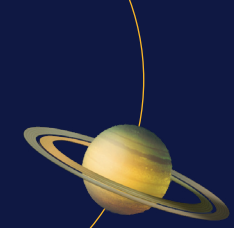
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This guide was written by **DR. ROBERT BITTNER**, LGBTQ+ Literature Specialist (<http://docrob.ca>) and Abigail Leverette Licensed Professional Counselor and National Certified Counselor.



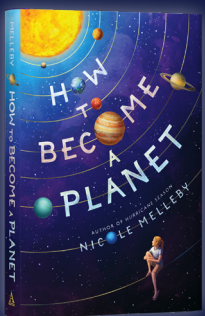
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Pluto keeps reciting the planets in the solar system whenever she is experiencing moments of higher stress? Do you do anything similar when you're anxious or stressed? Consider how rituals or patterns can evoke a sense of comfort. Pay attention to whether these coping strategies show up elsewhere as you continue to read the novel.
2. “[S]he tried to breathe and tried not to cry and failed at doing both those things. ‘I’m *fine*,’ she said through gritted teeth” (p. 42). Why do you think Pluto says she’s fine even though it’s clear that she is not? Why do you think “I’m fine” is such a common response when things are less than fine? Why do people still say it even when it is unconvincing?
3. What does Pluto mean when she says she and her mother are “their own universe against the world” (p. 45)? Why is she hesitant to go live with her father? Do you think Pluto actually believes that her mother thinks she is “too much to handle” (p. 46)?
4. In chapter seven, Fallon asks Pluto what will happen if she finishes the checklist. Pluto thinks, “I get to feel like Pluto again” (p. 60). What do you think she means by this? Why would a checklist make her feel like herself again?
5. For the first half of the book, Pluto seems to think Meredith doesn’t like her very much anymore. Why does Pluto believe this? What changes her mind? If you were Meredith, how might you let Pluto know that you are still her friend?
6. In chapter nine, Pluto tells herself that her diagnosis isn’t her (p. 83). What does Pluto mean? Why do you think her diagnosis is so important to her and to others? What does it mean to be defined by a psychological or medical diagnosis?
7. Pluto refers to classifications and labels on a number of occasions. What are some of the benefits of different labels and classifications? Are there downsides to trying to label and classify things or people? What happens with Pluto’s understanding of her diagnosis as her story progresses?
8. After Pluto cuts Fallon’s hair, her mother is upset with her, but on the way home from Fallon’s house, Pluto starts laughing about the situation, and so does her mom (p. 134). Why do you think Pluto is laughing so hard even though she just got in trouble? Have you ever laughed during what might be seen as an inappropriate time? Why does her mom join in?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

9. While confronting Pluto one day, Meredith tells her, “[Y]ou’re not sick. You look fine” (p. 136). Meredith assumes she can tell how Pluto is feeling by how she looks, but things like depression are often invisible. What could Meredith have done in this situation instead of making assumptions? How might it be hurtful to someone with mental health issues for others in their lives to make these kinds of assumptions?
10. In chapter sixteen, Pluto doesn’t seem to understand how someone can experience emotions in a song without words. Think about how you respond to different kinds of music. Are you able to experience emotions from music without words? Why do you think Pluto has difficulty with this?
11. A major theme of the novel is forgiveness and acceptance. In fact, Dr. Collins specifically states, “You just need to learn how to care for and accept this new understanding of you” (p. 202). What do you think Dr. Collins means by this? How does forgiveness and acceptance affect Pluto and her depression? In what ways, and for what reasons, do people have to forgive one another throughout the book?
12. In chapter twenty-four, Pluto and her mom have a long conversation about Pluto’s checklist. Why does Pluto’s mom think the list is a bad idea? What makes Pluto’s and Fallon’s lists different, according to Pluto’s mom? What does she mean when she says the list wasn’t working for Pluto because she “didn’t need to change” (p. 266)?
13. What is so important about Pluto having Mrs. McAuliffe as a tutor while working through her depression? How does Mrs. McAuliffe help Pluto to better understand her feelings for Fallon throughout the summer? Why do you think Pluto’s mom pushes back when Mrs. McAuliffe brings up Pluto’s sexuality?
14. The novel’s title, *How to Become a Planet*, has multiple meanings and can refer to both the classification of Pluto the planet and to Pluto the person’s own narrative journey. What similarities can you find between the two throughout the novel? Find specific examples to support the connections you make.
15. When Mrs. McAuliffe goes to Pluto’s house (p. 254), she states, “If you ever need someone to talk to . . . my door is open. I know you have a therapist, but it never hurts to have a big support system.” What is a support system? Who is in Pluto’s support system aside from her therapist? Think about the people in your life. Who would you identify as the people in your support system?





A MESSAGE TO PARENTS

“Parents and caretakers often have an urge to ‘fix’ a child’s problem, tell them that things will get better, to ‘not worry’ about something that is causing them distress. We tend to talk openly about positive emotions and push away negative ones, sometimes even punishing a negative response. It’s important to allow children to experience all emotions and be able to process those emotions with you. Talking to your children about their emotions and behavior helps them to gain insight into their feelings, increase healthy, appropriate emotional communication, and learn lasting coping skills. Remember to ask questions as opposed to explaining, help them label their feelings, and encourage them to problem-solve. If we teach them to communicate their feelings early on, we increase the likelihood that they will reach out for support when they need it.”

Psychology Today is a great way to access mental health care. Many people go through their insurance provider’s website, but I find that going to this website and filtering search results by insurance accepted, location, type of counseling, and various other categories is much more helpful and user-friendly. Therapist bios and photos are also included.

[PSYCHOLOGYTODAY.COM](https://www.psychologytoday.com)



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Many teachers and parents are afraid of using incorrect terms for the LGBTQ+ communities or do not understand the terms that their youth are using. Below is a helpful glossary from the Human Rights Campaign.

[HRC.ORG](https://www.hrc.org)

LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk of suicide than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts. The Trevor Project is a helpline for LGBTQ+ individuals under 25 to talk to a professional if they are in crisis or having suicidal thoughts. If they aren’t comfortable with making a phone call, they can also text or chat.

[THETREVORPROJECT.ORG](https://www.thetrevorproject.org)

Below is the link for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, a 24/7 free and confidential support for anyone experiencing a mental health crisis. Their number is 1-800-273-8255. Individuals can call or chat on the website, and there is a Spanish-language option as well as deaf/hard of hearing.

[SUICIDEPREVENTIONLIFELINE.ORG](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

