

STRAY CITY

dispatch Volume 1

HELLO! I'M CHELSEY JOHNSON. I WROTE THE NOVEL STRAY CITY, AND WE MADE THIS COMPANION ZINE TO OFFER A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES.

“I tore through *Stray City* like an orphaned reader seeking a home in the ragtag yet shimmering world that Chelsey Johnson so wondrously brings to life.”

—CARRIE BROWNSTEIN

Featuring...

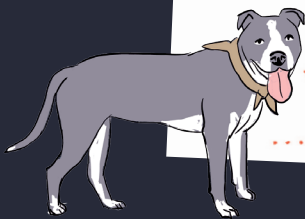
+ BEHIND-the-BOOK!

+ AUTHOR Q&A

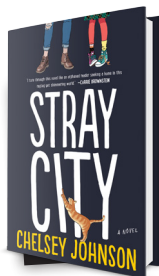
with EMMA STRAUB!

+ STRAY CITY MIXTAPE 🎧

... and lots of drawings



STRAY CITY • A NOVEL • MARCH 2018



BEHIND-THE-BOOK

BY CHELSEY JOHNSON

Stray City started as one thing and ended as another altogether.

At first, it was Ryan's story: a man stranded in a van, with a cat and a shameful secret, in Bemidji, Minnesota. But as I worked, I began to lose interest in writing about a straight white man engaging in bad behavior and dodging responsibility—that plot was everywhere—and my gaze wandered toward the pregnant girlfriend he'd left behind in Portland, Oregon. I thought: Wait, what if she's a lesbian, one of my kind? Now I was curious. I wanted to figure out who she was and how she'd ended up here.

As I made my way into Andrea's story, I realized I had tapped into a rich, complicated, fascinating world that I knew intimately and yet almost never saw reflected in fiction or film. An unusually high number of people come to Portland from elsewhere, especially young people, seeking to become artists, musicians, unconventional, queer. It's a city of strays who band together to form a home (I was one of them). So I decided to write a novel that captured this world—the rare book that my friends could read and see themselves in. I also had outsiders in mind though, those who know little about us; I wanted to give them a glimpse into our exuberant, difficult, and often-overlooked lives.

But I learned a hard truth along the way: sometimes you have to leave the place you love in order write about it. Or at least I did. I couldn't truly write about Portland until I moved to rural Ohio for a teaching gig

at Oberlin College. All my friends and family had abruptly evaporated into digital space. I longed for the real, and I was crazed with loneliness. I missed punk resourcefulness and scrappiness. I missed queer club nights and playfully themed house parties (Glasses and



Lingerie! Astrological Signs! Hot Messes!). I missed karaoke at my favorite divey Chinese joint on the northern outskirts of town, Chopsticks III How Can Be Lounge. I missed going to cheap rock shows, especially when my friends were the ones playing. I missed hours-long dog walks in the mossy Douglas firs of Forest Park. I missed the girls rock camp: the kids and the nuttily brilliant songs they wrote. I missed my tiny ranch house and the overburdened pear tree I never pruned and my shabby North Portland street with its cracked pavement and ramshackle bungalows and '80s cars and the old recluse neighbor we called Pajama Man for obvious reasons. I missed the gray shifting skies and the evergreens, so dark from a distance that they were almost black. I missed the incomparable feeling of coming home.

So I wrote myself into the world I missed. I wrote my friends onto the page. I wanted to write about home and family. I wanted to capture the pain and joy of being queer, the familial baggage we carry and the ways we save each other and the ways we document our collective existence because no one else is going to. The farther away I moved from the community and life that I loved, the more urgently I needed to write about it. I tried to bottle a time and a place that I knew would soon gentrify out of existence and erode in my memory. I tried to make us real.



NO APOLOGIES
NO ASSIMILATION
QUEER
FOREVER

"Stray City has it all. As funny as it is moving; as joyful, as radically communal, as it is lonesome. Honestly, one of the most absorbing, finely tuned books I've had the pleasure of falling down into."

—JUSTIN TORRES, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WE THE ANIMALS*

Q&A

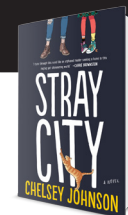
Emma Straub interviews Chelsey Johnson About
STRAY CITY



Credit: Jennifer Bastian



Credit: Kara Thompson



EMMA: *Stray City* is your first novel. Can you tell me about your inspiration for the book? How it all began? And a little about your creative process?

CHELSEY: I'd written a short story about a man who impulsively ditched his life and ends up stuck in Bemidji, Minnesota, and at forty pages long, it still didn't feel finished. Obviously, a lot changed. Craft-wise, this novel thrust me into a whole new kind of wilderness that I had to figure out how to navigate. I wrote a lot of material longhand—I like the physicality of pulling a thought from mind to paper down the avenue of the arm—and in transit. On my hour-long drive to school, I'd dictate dialogue into my iPhone. And the ending came to me on an early-morning hike up an overgrown logging road on Mount Hood. Balancing my metal coffee cup in one hand, I tapped record with the other and murmured the last sentences into my phone. When I got back to my tent, I transcribed the final scene into my notebook.

EMMA: Your book gently pokes fun at the world in which it's set—namely, the lesbian underground of late-'90s Portland, Oregon. How would you describe your relationship to Portland and to this period and community? What inspired you to write about it?

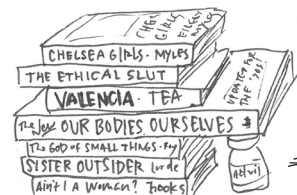
CHELSEY: Portland was my home for several years, both before and after the late '90s, and I loved it wholeheartedly, flaws and all. Everything I poke fun at, I've been or done at some point. Obviously it's a place that lends itself to satire—there's no need to name any popular sketch comedy shows here, is there?—but the obvious and absurd are such minor sides of the multifaceted communities that have deep roots there. It really is—or was—a city where misfits and strays find home. I also felt a bittersweet fascination with the end of analog life. So until recently, life had been almost entirely present and tactile: the world was composed of physical space that I moved through with friends and strangers; I read fat, finger-blackening alt-weekly newspapers I picked up from corner stands; zines were social media. So I guess I wrote myself back into a world where all my friends lived and everyone was completely present in real time.



EMMA: At one point, your main character Andrea says, "All of us were refugees of the nuclear family, and some, like me, still embedded, secret agents in our homes of origin but full citizens here." As readers, we've seen many iterations of the family dramedy. What inspired you to write this one from this particular point of view—that of a young lesbian?

CHELSEY: In a way, queer identity starts in the family. That initial awareness of difference emerges in the context of the (usually) straight people who raised you. For me, as for many, coming out to family was the primary battleground. Or even the only real battleground: I was out everywhere else in my life before I came out to my parents. It was the last and hardest place not because my parents were monsters—they're wonderful—but because it required breaking the character they thought I was, and thus breaking the story of who the family was.

All of us challenge and alter our family's narrative in our own ways, major or minor, but queer or trans identity delivers a particular shock because it threatens to reject reproduction. So then we find our chosen families, our queer families—and other kinds of orthodoxies take hold there too. I wanted to push back at the strictures of both. But most importantly, I wanted to imagine and realize joyful, inventive, liberatory possibilities of family formation: gay, straight, and everything in between.

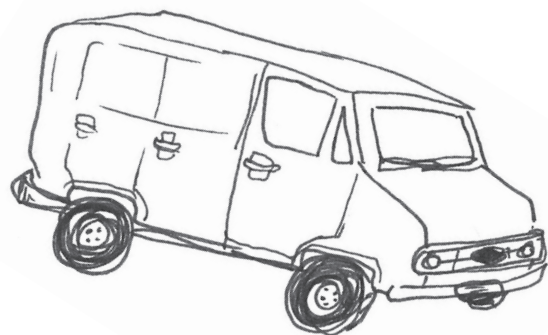
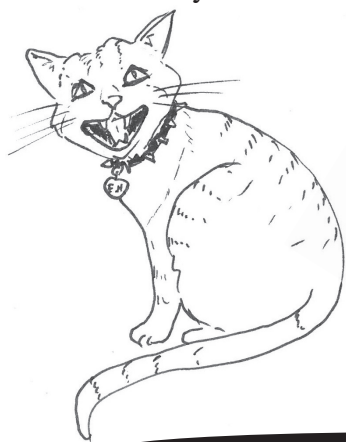


Q&A

CONTINUED.....

EMMA: All your characters are strays in one form or another, seeking a home or a family of some sort. At one point, Andrea even adopts a dog named Bullet and a cat she calls Edith Head. Would you say that you're a dog or a cat person?

CHELSEY: Can I dodge the binary and claim both? My first animals in adult life were my goofball cats, Seven and Foot Foot, who had grand personalities and made me laugh every day. I straight-up immortalized Seven as Edith Head in the book. But now they've passed and I live with two dogs, a genius three-legged Heeler/Border Collie mutt and the golden-hearted pit bull mix who is my animal soulmate on this earth. Cats will shred your furniture, but dogs will maul your shoes and books. Cats are the best for winter lap warming, exfoliating your skin, and giving you tiny massages, but dogs are the best for road trips, hikes, and full-body spooning. If I really must choose one, I have to knock a point off cats for one reason only: the litterbox. Dogs win by a hair.



CHELSEY JOHNSON received an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and a Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. She currently lives in Richmond, CA, and teaches at the College of William & Mary. *Stray City* is her first novel.

EMMA STRAUB is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Modern Lovers* and *The Vacationers*. She recently opened her own bookstore in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn: www.booksaremagic.net

MIXTAPE

The soundtrack of *Stray City*,
from Nebraska → Portland → Bemidji
and back again.

tinyurl.com/straycitymixtape

SIDE A:

1. SONIC YOUTH,
"Schizophrenia"
2. NEW BAD THINGS:
"Josh Has A Crush on
a Femme from Reed"
3. BLATZ:
"Fuk Shit Up"
4. TEAM DRESCH:
"Fagetarian and Dyke"
5. MIRAH:
"Cold Cold Water"
6. GANG OF FOUR:
"Damaged Goods"
7. FREE KITTEN:
"Secret Sex Friend"
8. THE WIPERS:
"Let's Go Away"
9. HELIUM:
"Love \$\$\$"

SIDE B:

1. STONE PONEYS:
"Different Drum"
2. THE BUZZCOCKS:
"Ever Fallen in Love
(With Someone You
Shouldn't've)"
3. ELLIOTT SMITH:
"I Don't Think I'm Ever
Gonna Figure It Out"
4. THE REPLACEMENTS:
"Unsatisfied"
5. THE SPINANES:
"Sunday"
6. QUASI:
"I Never Want to
See You Again"
7. DUMP:
"On the Right Track Now"
8. THE RAINCOATS:
"No One's Little Girl"
9. AS MERCENÁRIAS:
"Inimigo"
10. BLÜBIRD:
"Little Yellow Lemon"
11. MARISA ANDERSON:
"Swan Island"

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Spread the word about

STRAY CITY

and tag us using #straycitybook

Talk to Chelsey on social media:



/chelseyjohnson



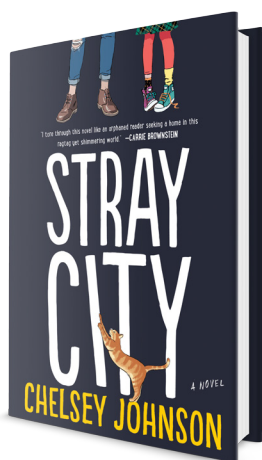
@chelseyhotel



@stray_city

“Written with wit and sensitivity and exquisite emotional intelligence, *Stray City* is an absolute pleasure to read.”

—JAMI ATTENBERG, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *ALL GROWN UP*



STRAY CITY WILL BE IN BOOKSTORES
EVERYWHERE MARCH 2018

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