

## Everything Grows

**Aimee Herman**

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Delving deep into the psyche of teenage pain and identity-building, Aimee Herman's *Everything Grows* turns dark circumstances into an encomium to the adults who help teens grow.

Eleanor has trouble from all sides: she is still reeling from her mother's attempted suicide when a bully from her school, James, kills himself. Her wonderful English teacher encourages her students to write letters to someone as a form of journaling, and Eleanor chooses James.

This epistolary novel unfolds as Eleanor makes new friends, loses old ones, gets to know James's mother, and finds ways to reconnect with her mother. Through it all, she explores her own identity and learns more about what it means to identify as LGBTQ+. Through her letters to James, she processes the many emotions that come with growing up and understanding oneself.

The letters make it possible to get to know Eleanor at a particularly close level. She is vulnerable, right down to making spelling mistakes. She is poetic. She acknowledges many of the frightening rabbit trails of thought that people go down, especially regarding her fears that her mother might relapse. At first focused on confusion and worry around James's suicide, the story evolves, becoming more about Eleanor's identity as she tries on a new name, Eler, and begins to explore what is right for her.

Certain adults form signposts for Eler, guiding them toward their nonbinary identity and affirming them as they explore: from their mother's lesbian friend Flor to their own sister Greta, Eler seeks and finds compassionate, positive people in their life. These incredibly supportive friends offset the darker tones of the book, making the text a fundamentally hopeful one.

Awkward, affirming, and compassionate, this story about coming into one's identity will win over the hearts of its young adult audiences.

LAURA LEAVITT (May/June 2019)

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