

# DOG FLOWERS

BOOK  
CLUB  
KIT



DANIELLE GELLER



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. By archiving her mother's possessions, Geller is, in a way, claiming her mother's place in history. This is a radical act because history has often ignored women like Tweety: Indigenous women, addicted women, impoverished women. What do we gain as a society by learning and thinking about the details of Tweety's life? What did you gain personally? What other types of people (or specific individuals) could you benefit from understanding on this deeper level?
2. How can the process of archiving help one work through memories or trauma?
3. Occasionally, Geller's memory of an event will contradict how her mother recorded it in her diary. How does this complicate our traditional understanding of "truth"? Is it possible to understand, analyze, or come to terms with a part of your past even if you can never be completely sure of the truth?
4. In what ways can our memories harm us? In what ways can they protect us?
5. What do you think of the concept of cousin-sisters as practiced by Geller's extended family? How does it challenge, expand, or reflect your own idea of family?
6. Do you think we have an inherent need to understand our heritage and family history? Why or why not?
7. Geller's relationship with her family is complicated—as all of ours tend to be. Discuss the ways your own family both supported and failed you. How have you supported and failed them?
8. Geller and her sister ended up on vastly different paths, despite being born to the same parents and raised together. Has this type of experience happened in your family, or with anyone you know? Discuss how and why siblings' paths might diverge so drastically.
9. Some people numb their pain with alcohol and drugs; others with the distraction and dopamine drip of the internet. To some extent, self-medicating can be helpful (or at least not completely destructive). But at what point do you think it begins to do more harm than good? Have you ever reached this point? If so, how did you know?
10. When learning more about her mother's family, what kinds of things does Geller end up learning about herself?

# A Q&A WITH DANIELLE GELLER

## Can you explain the title of your book?

When my mother was in the hospital, I spent a few days at her ex-boyfriend's house to sort through her final belongings. On my last morning there, he took me into the backyard to show me their garden, where his roommate's dog was digging holes in the loose soil. As we walked back inside, he pointed at the muddy paw prints that led back into the house and told me my mother used to call them "dog flowers." This has always been the book's title; even before I began drafting pages, writing this book has been my attempt to understand better the way my mother saw the world.

## In *Dog Flowers*, you intertwine memory and archive to share the story of your family. As a trained archivist, what was it like archiving such a personal project?

What an archive is or encompasses has expanded in the popular imagination over the last decade, but when I first started this project—when my idea of "the archive" was still steeped in what I was learning and practicing in libraries and archives in Boston—I thought of the archive in institutional terms: My mother's archive was a collection of documents that might have informational value, in part because women like her aren't often found in archives. I also imagined each document in her archive as if it held some objective and fundamental truth that might illuminate her life for me. As I worked through this book, I realized that each of these beliefs was flawed. My relationship with her archive became much more personal, and I began to understand the limits of "the document."

## Your book opens with you finding your mother's belongings, which are subsequently archived throughout. However, this is also a story about your relationship, obligations, and love for your father and your sisters. Can you explain how this evolved throughout the process of writing?

I really struggled with my father's place in this book. I resented the outsized space he had taken up in our lives—the ongoing pain he caused—and I wanted to pull him out of the story and *just* write about my mother and my sisters. Writing around him entirely was an untruth, but in every subsequent draft, I centered my sisters more and more, which reflects the choice I make in my familial relationships as well.



# A Q&A WITH DANIELLE GELLER

**What was the research process like? How did you determine which photographs, diary entries, and other documents to include?**

There were a few simple rules about what I could or could not include, like only including documents *from* my mother's archive (and not other photographs I might have had from my own collection). But otherwise, the selection of documents to include in the book felt intuitive. There were certain documents that I returned to so often they became my own memories—lines I heard in my head like a refrain.

***Dog Flowers* subverts the traditional structure of a prose book by incorporating other types of media. What is the significance of form and structure in *Dog Flowers*? What does the book tell us about time, memory, and intergenerational trauma?**

When I was in my teens, a counselor off-handedly suggested I might be experiencing the effects of PTSD, but I didn't receive treatment for it then (or later). That meant I wasn't able to recognize what aspects of my coping behaviors were harmful or helpful until much later in life. I obsessed over memories of traumatic events because I was grasping for control—I thought that if I could just figure out *why* these things had happened, I could prevent them from happening again. The structure of the book was born out of this feeling—the narrative circles around events and relationship dynamics that seem to repeat, unchanging, across time and space: a temporal loop of trauma.