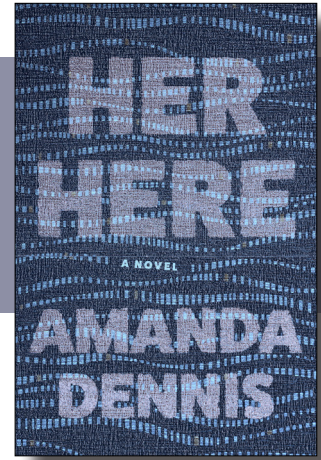




Her Here

A novel by Amanda Dennis

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“Spellbinding. . . . Wholly engrossing. . . . This hypnotic and deeply cerebral exploration is a seductive escape. Through Ella and Elena’s efforts to reconstruct a sense of self—outside family, beyond academia and expectation—through language, Dennis confronts the various ways we try to understand ourselves and others.” —*Washington Post*

“Dennis’s elegant yet propulsive debut becomes much more than a missing-persons search. . . . Elena’s narrative-within-a-narrative nicely reveals the creative process, while Dennis’s larger story confirms the value of living boldly.”
—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“In *Her Here*, Dennis has written a metaphysical investigation that is also a wonderfully personal account of a daughter coming to terms with the loss of her mother, and a mother coming to terms with the loss of her daughter. As Elena conjures Ella’s last days, the richly imagined narrative moves back and forth between Paris and Thailand, carrying both characters and readers to a vivid and suspenseful conclusion.” —**Margot Livesey**, author of *The Flight of Gemma Hardy* and *The Boy in the Field*

“*Her Here* is a stunning debut from author Amanda Dennis. . . . The women in this story are complex and the ways their stories interconnect even more so. There were so many twists and turns I don’t think I accurately predicted even one plot development. It was suspenseful, raw, and every word absolutely crackled with intensity. Fans of Gillian Flynn take notice!”
—**Audrey Beatty**, River Bend Bookshop (Glastonbury, CT)

INTRODUCTION

Elena, struggling with memory loss due to a trauma that has unmoored her sense of self, deserts graduate school and a long-term relationship to accept a bizarre proposition from an estranged family friend in Paris: she will search for a young woman, Ella, who went missing six years earlier in Thailand, by rewriting her journals. As she delves deeper into Ella’s story, Elena begins to lose sight of her own identity and drift dangerously toward self-annihilation.

Her Here is an existential detective story with a shocking denouement that plumbs the creative and destructive powers of narrative itself.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

At age 21, like one of the main characters in *Her Here*, I boarded a plane for the other side of the world. There’s a paradox in travel, which exists also in reading: you plunge into what is unknown with the hope that what you find will rebound on your own life, enriching it. I spent a year in Southeast Asia just after college, teaching, volunteering, and traveling. After my return from Thailand, I remained interested in the impulse that had led me there: a blend of curiosity and escapism. . . . This novel, then, explores identity, the relation between self and world, the fallibility of memory (so important for constructing a self), and modes of projection we employ when relating to others. So often we make people into who we need them to be, and the novel includes this game of changing identities: a play of surrogate mothers, daughters, and lovers.





CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. The first chapter opens with a case of mistaken identity: a stranger believes Elena is a woman she used to know. “If it was you, you wouldn’t tell me, she says, squeezing my hands.” How does this scene encapsulate and echo the themes of memory, loss, and the longing for connection throughout the novel?
2. The title comes from a line early in the novel, when Elena first discovers Ella’s journals and thinks to herself, “I’d rather be her than here.” The author has described Elena’s task of “translating” Ella’s journals as a “quest for identity.” What is Elena searching for, about both Ella and herself? How does her immersion in Ella’s past influence the decisions she makes in her own life?
3. The story takes readers on a journey through the narrow streets of Paris, among the mango trees and monsoons of Thailand, and to a remote island village. How does the author use sensory details to immerse you in a place? When the settings changed, did the tone of the book remain the same?
4. Even though most of the journals she’s rewriting take place there, Elena has never been to Thailand. Is the Thailand she envisions a real place? Can you find any echoes of Elena’s experiences in Paris written into the reconstructed journals she’s creating? What are both Elena and Ella seeking to discover—or run away from—through travel?
5. In many ways, Elena and Ella’s circumstances are exceptional, but in others, they reflect what many young women endure in early adulthood. In what ways does this story describe universal experiences that young women have coming of age?
6. How do female friendships in the novel influence the main characters’ lives? Are these relationships more powerful than the romantic ones in the story?
7. The author recounts that a reader once told her “sometimes the mother-daughter bond can hold more tension than a love affair,” and much of the book centers on the theme of motherhood. Who are the mother or surrogate mother figures in the characters’ lives, and what roles do they play? How do you think Elena’s relationship with Ella’s estranged mother, Siobhán, might evolve after the story ends?
8. The author chose to punctuate dialogue with dashes instead of quotation marks. In an interview, she revealed that this subtler method of marking speech was a way for her to play with the different voices in the novel: Elena’s, Ella’s, and the blended voice of Elena retracing Ella’s journals. Were you able to keep the voices and characters separate as you were reading? How did this stylistic choice affect your reading experience?
9. What happens to Ella in Elena’s telling of her story? What really happens to her? Do you think the two versions are the same?
10. The publisher describes *Her Here* as “an existential detective story,” author Alexandra Kleeman calls it “a ghost story without a ghost,” and a bookseller compared it to the suspenseful fiction of Gillian Flynn. How would you describe the plot twists and psychological revelations within the novel? Did you anticipate the ending?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in Philadelphia, Amanda Dennis is an avid traveler who has lived in six countries, including Thailand. She has written about literature for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *Guernica*, and she is assistant professor of comparative literature and creative writing at the American University of Paris. *Her Here* is her first novel. Visit her website at www.amandadennis.net.

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