

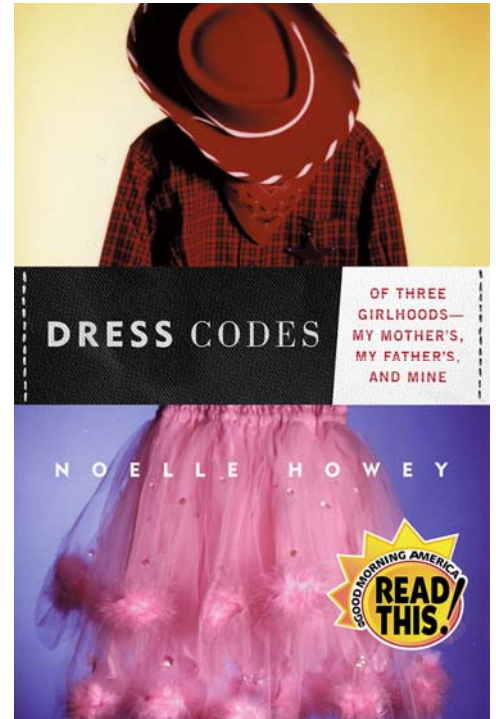
READING GROUP GUIDE

Dress Codes *Of Three Girlhoods—* *My Mother's, My Father's,* *and Mine*

by Noelle Howey

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Dress Codes* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Dress Codes*.

About the Book

Throughout her childhood in suburban Ohio, Noelle Howey struggled to gain love and attention from her distant father. To compensate for her father's brusqueness, Noelle idealized her nurturing mother and her conservative grandmother, who tried to turn Noelle in "a little lady." At age fourteen, Noelle's mother took her shopping at the mall, letting Noelle buy a pair of coveted Guess? Jeans, only to stare into the car windshield of the mall parking lot and blurt out the family secret: "Dad likes to wear women's clothes."

As Noelle copes with a turbulent adolescence, further confused by the male and female role models she had as a girl, her father begins to metamorphose into the loving parent she had always longed for—only now outfitted with pedal pushers and pink lipstick.

With edgy humor, courage, and remarkable sensitivity, Noelle Howey looks seriously at her mother's, and her father's, and her own transformation into womanhood, while challenging the American belief of what constitutes a "normal" family.

Praise

"In this rich memoir, Howey details not one life, but three. It's a difficult juggling act, but it pays off beautifully, for the story of her father's coming out as a male-to-female transsexual is only part of a larger narrative of growing up female in America....This is a loving portrait of a girl's complicated relationship with her father's femininity and her own." –Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Truth, as it turns out, really is stranger than fiction. Funnier, too. And sadder. Messier, as well—and just as rich and more interesting... This book may not be what everyone had in mind when they extol 'family values,' but rarely has the true value of family been so movingly and lovingly evoked." –John Colapinto, author of *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*

"Dress Codes is an extraordinarily book—I loved it. With disarming honesty and startling lucidity, Noelle Howey beautifully weaves together the stories of three people coming into themselves." –Thisbe Nisson, author of *The Good People of New York*

"Howey's story is full of humor and honesty, turning what could have been a sappy Oprah-esque confessional into a sincere meditation on the demands of growing up in any family." –*Elle Girl*

"Noelle Howey's story is astonishing for the skill, perception, and integrity with which it is told.... Dress Codes is both funny and entertaining, and purveys a vital social message: that there is not much more important than being at home in your body and mind." –Amy S. Wilensky, author of *Passing for Normal: A Memoir of Compulsion*

About the Author

Noelle Howey is the co-editor of *Out of the Ordinary: Essays on Growing Up with Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Parents*, winner of two 2001 Lambda Literary Awards. She has written for numerous publications including *Ms.*, *Glamour*, *Bitch*, *Jane*, *Seventeen*, *Mother Jones*, and *Self*. Noelle Howey lives with her husband and daughter in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Discussion Questions

1. In many ways, Dick and Noelle experience their adolescence together, simultaneously making the transformation into womanhood. How does each girl cope with this situation? How does Dick approach becoming a woman differently than he did becoming a man?

2. Discuss Dinah and Dick's relationship. Why is Dinah so invested in Dick despite the fact that he is emotionally and sexually distant? Why does she pass up her other prospects to marry him? When Dick transforms into Christine, how does their relationship change? Does Dinah feel as responsible for Christine as she did for Dick? Why or why not?
3. Dinah knew Dick's secret when she married him, yet it is the secret that keeps them distant and unhappy. In what ways does the secret damage Dick's relationship with Noelle? Why is it so easy for Christine to repair her relationship with Noelle and so difficult with Dinah?
4. What about Grandma H is so attractive to Noelle when she is a child? What changes? What does Grandma H later represent to Noelle that she is trying so hard to reject?
5. When they are first married, Dick and Dinah attend a few meetings for crossdressers but neither feels comfortable and they stop going. But later Christine attends meetings that she finds informative and friendly. Discuss what changes have occurred that allow Christine to attend transgender meetings with confidence?
6. Why does Dick take Noelle to see his father's grave? What is he trying to tell her? What mistakes did Dick's father make that Dick later repeats with Noelle?
7. Noelle has a turbulent adolescence in which she tries hard to find herself sexually. Why is having sex at a young age so important to Noelle? What is she trying to prove to herself? In what ways does sex dominate her relationships throughout high school and college?
8. On page 222, Dinah tells Dr. Smith, "I spent ages taking care of [Dick], and I don't have anything to show for it. I don't even know who I am anymore." Dr. Smith tells her to try and remember. Does Dinah find herself? In what ways does she come into her own womanhood through Dick's coming out? By the end of the narrative, how has Dinah changed? What about her is the same? Why does Noelle have a harder time dealing with her mother's changes than her father's transformation?
9. Throughout her childhood and adolescence, Noelle relates better to her mother than her father. Yet in many ways she is a lot like Dick. Considering Dick's boyhood, discuss Noelle's tendencies towards her father's behavior.
10. Publishers Weekly wrote, "The story of [Noelle's] father's coming out as a male-to-female transsexual is only part of a larger narrative of growing up female in America." What does *Dress Codes* say about being female in America? What female stereotypes must each of the women in the book face? How does each cope with overcoming how society says women "should" be?

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