
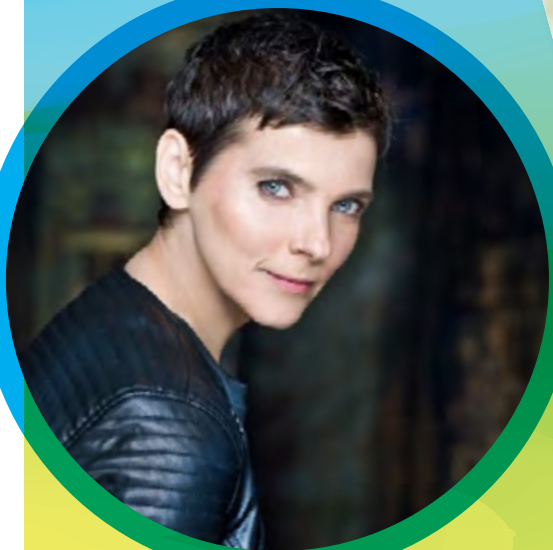
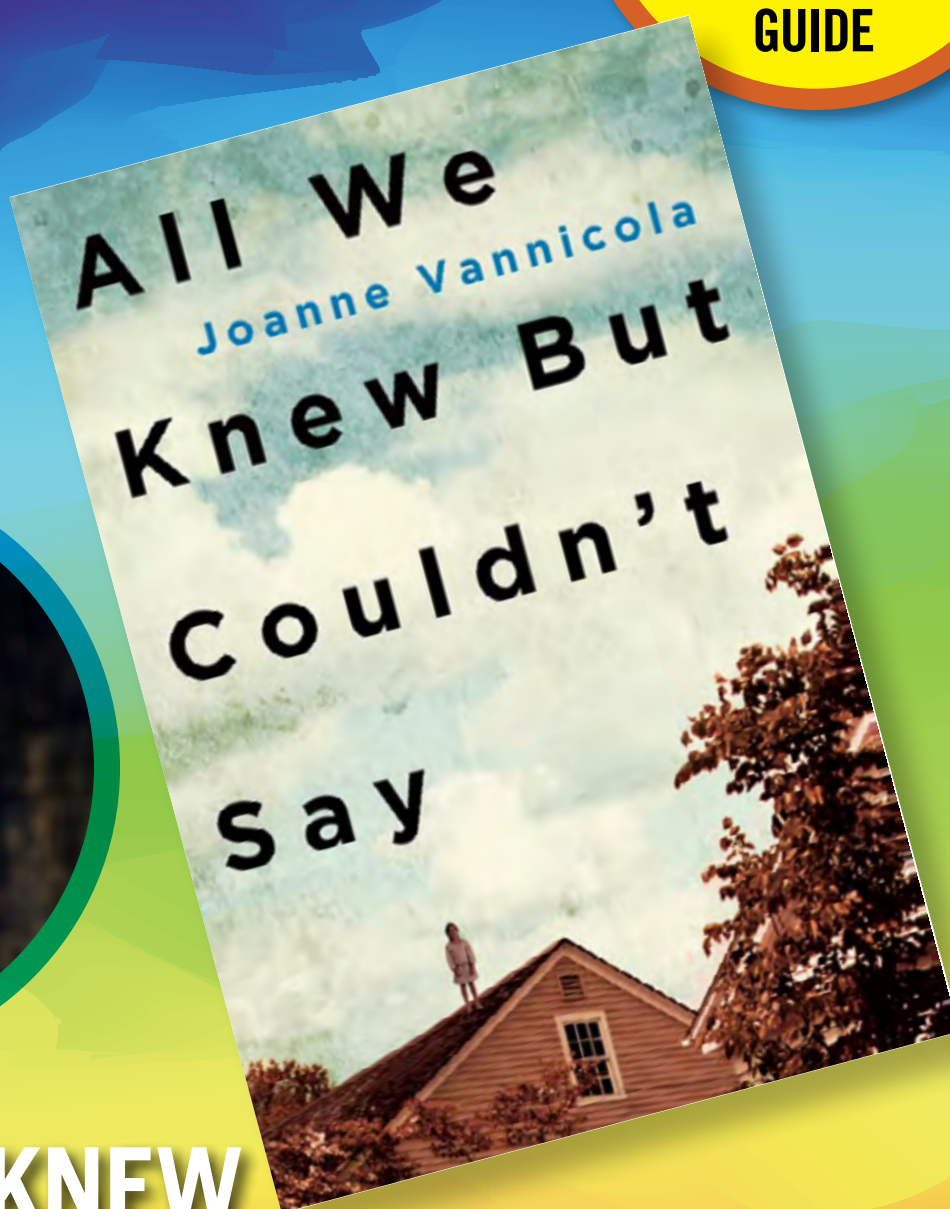


JULY/AUGUST 2020

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 
BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION
GUIDE



ALL WE KNEW BUT COULDN'T SAY

BY JOANNE VANNICOLA

RECOMMENDED BY DIANE TERRANA

WELCOME

Amnesty Book Club members

To celebrate Pride Season, our selection for July/August is *All We Knew But Couldn't Say* by Joanne Vannicola.

Joanne Vannicola grew up in a violent home with a physically abusive father and a mother who had no sexual boundaries. After being pressured to leave home at fourteen, and after fifteen years of estrangement, Joanne learns that their mother is dying. Compelled to reconnect, they visit with her, unearthing a trove of devastating secrets.

Joanne relates their journey from child performer to Emmy Award-winning actor, from hiding in the closet to embracing their own sexuality, from conflicted child and sibling to independent adult. *All We Knew But Couldn't Say* is a testament to survival, love, and the belief that it is possible to love the broken, and to love fully, even with a broken heart.

Joanne Vannicola will also be the first guest at our Amnesty Book Club exclusive Facebook Live event, where Amnesty's Gender Rights Campaigner Jackie Hansen will chat with Joanne about the book. If you haven't already, please "like" our **Facebook page** to receive updates on this and other great opportunities.

We hope you are staying safe during this difficult time. Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club! We welcome questions, suggestions, and/or comments at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

About this month's author, **Joanne Vannicola**



Joanne Vannicola is an Emmy award-winning actor, author, and advocate.

Vannicola is the chair of outACTRAto, the LGBTQ+ committee at ACTRA Toronto (union representing performers in the film, radio, television and new media industries), and sits on the sexual assault ad-hoc committee for women in film and television. Vannicola is the recipient of the Leslie Yeo award for volunteerism (2019), and the recipient of The Margaret Trudeau Advocacy Award (2020). Joanne founded the non-profit organization, Youth Out Loud, raising awareness about child abuse, sexual violence, and youth rights: www.youthoutloud.ca

All We Knew But Couldn't Say was released in June 2019, was featured on the list of Top 21 memoirs to read last summer by Bustle magazine, and was featured on The Next Chapter by Shelagh Rogers, the Toronto Star, the Globe, CTV mornings, NOW Magazine, The Girly Club, and the Lambda Literary Reviews. It was also a best seller at Glad Day bookshop in Toronto and made the top 40 books to read in summer 2020 by CBC Books and shortlisted for the Kobo Emerging Writer Prize for non-fiction 2020. They are currently co-developing a new series, and working on their second book, exploring themes of LGBTQI homelessness.

You can learn more at: www.joannevannicola.com
Or on Twitter or Instagram @joannevannicola



About this month's guest reader, **Diane Terrana**



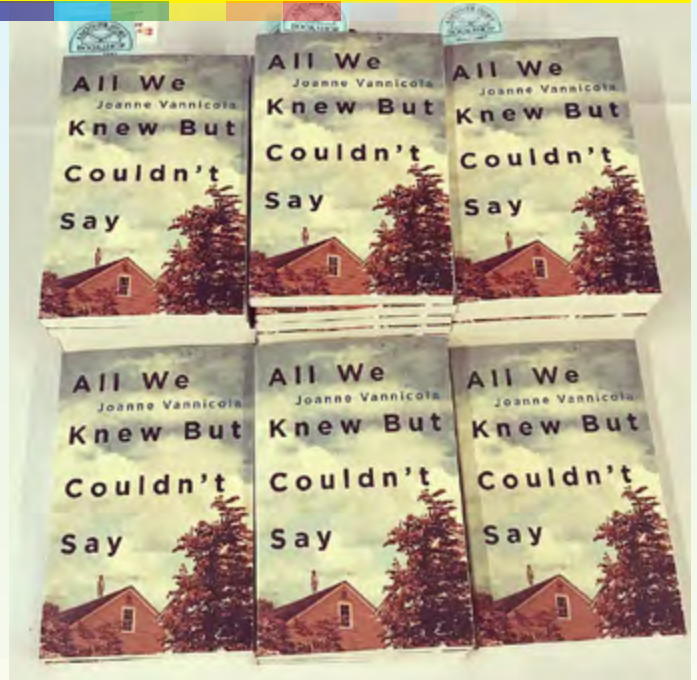
Diane Terrana is the Executive Editor at The Rights Factory and an award-winning instructor in the University of Toronto's SCS Creative Writing Program. Her debut YA novel, *The World on Either Side*, (Orca Book Publishers) was awarded a commendation by the Children's Book Council as a Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People in 2020. Between editing, teaching, and writing, Diane spends way too much time in her head. To get out of it, she went skydiving with her son on his 21st birthday—an experience that felt out of body as well.



Diane Terrana's Reflection on *All We Knew But Couldn't Say*



One of the remarkable things about this memoir is the complex picture that emerges of an abuser. Joanne has said that they don't like the word 'forgive' because it weighs heavily on abuse survivors who should never feel obliged to forgive their abusers.



I met Joanne Vannicola over ten years ago in a writing class. They were starting work on what would become *All We Knew but Couldn't Say*, a searing memoir, chronicling their journey from child abuse survivor to lesbian activist who has, despite homophobia and misogyny, emerged whole. "It is possible," Joanne writes, "to love the broken, and to love fully, even with a broken heart."

Way back then, our class realized Joanne's story was special. They were writing it as fiction, because they were apprehensive about exposure and were acutely aware that other people would be affected by a public accounting of their history. Over the years, however, Joanne thought more about fellow survivors, the childhood victims of abuse and the queer kids forced to live inauthentic or lonely lives on the fringes. Joanne decided to invoke the courage that took them through a personal fire and call their story by its real name: memoir.

All We Knew but Couldn't Say opens in 2002, in Toronto's Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, where Joanne's mother, Helen, is dying. They have not seen each other for fifteen years, and their meeting is fraught. The adult Joanne needs answers about their childhood abuse (at the hands of both parents), and needs resolution for the residual trauma: a life-threatening eating disorder, self-sabotaging behaviours, and suicide attempts. Helen resists, hints,

and prevaricates, but there is something *she* needs. Helen's long hair is falling out, and she wants her head shaved. In a startling scene, one that lingers long after reading, Joanne shaves Helen's head, finding two things to be true: it is "an intimate act" and "it is hard to hate when someone is dying."

One of the remarkable things about this memoir is the complex picture that emerges of an abuser. Joanne has said that they don't like the word 'forgive' because it weighs heavily on abuse survivors who should never feel obliged to forgive their abusers. Nevertheless, Joanne develops empathy for their mother out of a growing realization that they are both victims of atrocious inter-generational abuse.

The chronological story begins in 1973 Montreal: a world of tap classes, Sesame Street auditions, and make believe that Joanne describes as a "great escape from reality." A more jarring juxtaposition is hard to conceive of. Big Bird and beatings from their father. Triple-time steps and sexual abuse from their mother. Joanne's oldest sister is permanently removed from the home, but social workers never even interview Joanne or their other siblings.

The acting world itself, despite its opportunities for escape—theatre tours, movie sets, and a Juilliard audition—is still a place of discrimination against LGBTQ2+ individuals. There "were no lesbian

role models in film and television—not even Ellen DeGeneres had come out yet.” Joanne struggles to find a place in this world, nearly jeopardizing their role in the film *Maggie’s Secret* with their rebellion against gender norms.

After an Emmy award for *Maggie’s Secret*, Joanne is invited to LA, to the promise of ‘American’ stardom. But a series of auditions leave them feeling misgendered by the image they are supposed to project, and they make a life-altering decision. Joanne leaves LA—“the women with heels and implants, and men with cameras and wandering eyeballs”—and comes home to Canada. They hope to express their authentic self here, and notably, their first role is of a lesbian in Denys Arcand’s *Love and Human Remains*.

As a story teller, Joanne is gripping; as a memoirist, they are generous. There is so much more story here. So much I haven’t said. There are Joanne’s harrowing street adventures as an angry teen, political theatre roots, discovery of a terrible betrayal by a mentor.

There are love affairs: heartbreak with Carla who keeps their relationship hidden and their freedom with Elia who hides nothing. There is their ongoing attempt to heal wounds and speak truth. When Joanne’s mother finally dies, the sisters come together. “We may have been broken, but brokenness itself is something that can be held.”

It is impossible to read this memoir without becoming enraged at Joanne’s parents, at society with its systemic failures in protecting the vulnerable, at the prejudices that squash spirits and trample on human rights, and finally, at humans in general. I personally spend a great deal of time despairing of and raging at my species: at its venality, its cruelty, its stupidity. But at times I’m swaddled in love for my own kind. Reading this memoir was one of those times. Joanne Vannicola’s triumphant rejection of hatred, their espousal of love, and their relentless activism on behalf of the world’s disenfranchised represent the best of being human.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM DIANE TERRANA

1. Joanne Vannicola’s memoir exposes ugly truths and in doing so promotes discussion about painful subjects. What are these subjects? What was the taboo subject that no one around Joanne ever wanted to hear?
2. Voice is a dominant theme in *All We Knew but Couldn’t Say*, as is evident in the title. Joanne’s voice is often muted, and at one point they ask “How...do...I...speak...words?” But there are times, even as a young child, when they find their voice. When are these seminal moments?
3. It is tempting to believe many of the tragedies that befall the child Joanne could not happen today. But is that true? What systemic failures does *All We Knew but Couldn’t Say* reveal? Have you been personally touched by similar systemic failures? As you look around your community, do you see evidence of any?
4. The more success Joanne finds as an actor, the more they are aware of gender and how misgendered they often feel. How does Joanne assert their truth as an LGBTQ2S individual? What do they sacrifice to do it?
5. Why do Joanne and Elia stage a kiss-in? What does this say about the surrounding culture? What does it symbolize?
6. As Joanne’s mother is close to death, she divulges her own terrible abuse. Joanne doesn’t want to feel empathy, as they are afraid that caring about their mother will wipe away their truth. What do they mean by that?
7. How did you feel reading this memoir? What message(s) are you left with?



LGBTI RIGHTS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19



Amnesty International / Sergio Ortiz

A human rights response to COVID-19 must include an intersectional approach which recognizes the specific impacts of the pandemic on LGBTI people, and the need for specific actions to ensure that the pandemic response doesn't lead to discrimination and further inequalities.

Everyone is impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. But we aren't all impacted in the same ways or to the same extent. Multiple and intersecting identities including gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, disability, age, family status, employment status, and immigration status, all shape how a person experiences the pandemic.

LGBTI people face significant discrimination which leads to barriers to accessing healthcare services; high rates of homelessness, poverty, and social isolation;

and high rates of harassment and violence. The pandemic has further exacerbated these inequalities.

According to Egale Canada, before the pandemic, 27% of transgender patients have been refused care in Canada. Since the pandemic began, in Canada and around the world, access to gender affirming care and sexual and reproductive health services has been drastically reduced or redirected to the COVID-19 response. Some people may not be able to access medication. Sexual and reproductive health services must be declared essential services so that access isn't limited during the pandemic.

Chosen family and support networks are critical for LGBTI people around the world. With mandatory social distancing measures in place in much of the world, LGBTI people may be cut off from support groups and social services, including those providing access to food, medicine, and peer support. Some civil society organizations serving LGBTI communities have seen their work increase as they support community members and pivot to contribute to the pandemic response. Many fear financial insecurity

due to decreased donations, cancelled grants, and the inability to hold fundraising events because of social distancing guidelines.

In some countries, including Panama and Peru, social distancing guidelines call for men and women to have separate days when they are allowed to leave their homes to buy groceries and run other errands. The guidelines don't account for non-binary people, or transgender people whose identification documents may not correspond with their gender identity, leading to harassment by authorities and the general public.

LGBTI people are more likely to experience poverty and homelessness. Less than 50% of transgender people in Canada are employed full-time and 25-45% of the homeless youth population in Canada identifies as LGBTI. According to Egale Canada, an estimated half of LGBTI households have faced lay-offs or reduced employment hours because of the pandemic, compared to 39% of households in Canada overall.

Some governments are using far reaching emergency powers to criminalize LGBTI people. In late March,

23 people living at a shelter for LGBTI people in Kampala, Uganda, were arrested for violating social distancing guidelines, despite there not being guidelines on how many people could gather in private homes or shelters. In Hungary, parliament passed new legislation during the pandemic, which prohibits transgender people from legally changing their gender identity. This sort of state overreach is why Amnesty International signed a joint public statement from 301 organizations, academics, and others calling on Canada to adopt robust oversight measures to help ensure that the pandemic response does not further rights violations, including violations of the rights of LGBTI people.

A pandemic is not an excuse to violate human rights. Amnesty International has called on governments to ensure that human rights are at the core of the pandemic response and recovery plans. The pandemic is an opportunity to re-envision what the COVID-19 world should look like – and that must be a world where the rights of LGBTI people are respected, protected, and upheld.

Further reading:

- Egale's National Survey Results: The impact of COVID-19 on the LGBTQI2S Community
- A Feminist Action Agenda: For Canada's Global Response to COVID-19
- Dignity Network Canada: Briefing Memo on COVID-19 & Global SOGIESC/ LGBTI+ Human Rights
- Amnesty Canada Joint Public Statement: Putting Human Rights at the Heart of Canada's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

TAKE ACTION



Transgender asylum seeker, Kelly Gonzalez Aguilar, fears COVID-19 whilst in detention in USA.

Free trans asylum seeker Kelly Gonzalez Aguilar from detention

Kelly Gonzalez Aguilar, a 23-year-old transgender woman, fled because of violence against her based on her gender identity. She traveled to the United States, where she has been held in immigration detention since August 2017 while she awaits the results of her asylum claim. Kelly fears becoming infected by COVID-19 because of the inadequate measures taken by authorities to protect detainees and staff from the virus.

Amnesty International is concerned about the safety of Kelly and other people in detention during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amnesty International has received accounts by detainees of dangerous conditions in the immigration detention facility where Kelly is held, including that authorities will not provide hand sanitizer or face masks to detainees, even though it is impossible for them to physically distance themselves.

Please contact US immigration officials and demand that they immediately release Kelly on parole.

Please send an email, tweet, or write a letter as soon as possible.

TAKE ACTION NOW!

<https://www.amnesty.ca/get-involved/take-action-now/usa-free-trans-asylum-seeker-kelly-gonzalez-aguilar-detention>

Kelly's spirits are down after such a long time in immigration detention. Send her a message so she knows that she is not alone:

<https://www.amnesty.ca/get-involved/take-action-now/send-solidarity-message-detained-trans-asylum-seeker-kelly-gonzalez>

Take virtual actions in support of LGBTI rights throughout Pride season!

<https://www.amnesty.ca/blog/pride-2020-taking-protest-online>



COMING UP IN SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020

Good Citizens Need Not Fear By Maria Reva

Recommended by guest reader:
Tyler Hellard

The discussion guide will be sent out in September 2020.
In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments,
please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca



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