

I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World Study Guide

I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World by Eve Ensler

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Plot Summary

Writer Eve Ensler caught the world's attention with her first book "The Vagina Monologues". While it was geared towards women, this book is specifically written for adolescent girls.

In the introduction, Ensler writes that the majority of girls feel pressure to please others and lose their own voice in the process. She stresses that this book is "a call to your original girl self, to your emotional creature self, to move at your speed, to walk with your step, to wear your color."

"I am an Emotional Creature" is a series of monologues. The author toured the world extensively and the monologues she has written are inspired by the girls she met along the way.

Some of the pieces are poems about the strength of girls, their emotion, their fire. Some point out the challenges of being a girl. Many stories are from individual viewpoints from different places. There is a girl whose parents force her to have a nose job. Another girl handles her parental pressures by choosing anorexia as a release. There are girls who are not in control of their fates: a factory worker; a child prostitute. One girl refuses to take up arms while another is on a mission to be a suicide bomber. There are girls who change their fates- the girl who escapes sexual slavery; the girl who runs away from being sold; the girl who battles her inner voices to speak up and ask her partner to wear a condom.

Each story reflects the real and figurative shackles society puts on girls. Girls are told their natural tendencies are to be suppressed, but this collection tells them otherwise.



SECTION I a: Pages 3-31

SECTION I a: Pages 3-31 Summary

A poem kicks off the book. A girl questions the weaknesses in society, the many problems and we are not addressing them. The deep rift between the rich and the poor is unjust. There is no responsible action when it comes to the environment. Money is funding wars instead of the hungry. Women bear the brunt of extreme violence and many are held as slaves. She questions what happened to fury, accountability, kindness. Why aren't students actively protesting as they once did? She expresses her fear, her loneliness. She recognizes that it is up to this generation to step up and fight the tide of what is happening in the world.

What follows is the story of another girl, who is brought in to the popular circle. She feels pressure to always have the right clothes and to be mean to the right people in order to stay in the group. One day though, she is nice to Wendy- someone who willingly left the world of popularity. She is ousted from the group for having been nice to Wendy - but Wendy then befriends her.

A short poem highlights some downsides to being a girl- lack of control, perception of weakness, menstruation, taking care of a family, not being allowed employment.

A girl writes how she cannot live up to her parents' expectations and that she relates to her 'bad boy' troubled boyfriend.

A girl lists what she wishes she could say to her mother, to open the doors of honesty and trust.

A pregnant girl is sucking her thumb as she reflects on whether or not she wants to keep her child. She had been practicing abstinence but, she says, "once the kissing starts..." She doesn't want to take a life but she wants to continue school, and does not want to deal with the crying.

Next comes a list of what makes a 'good girl'. All of the items point to obeying without question.

Following that is the poem Don't, of all the things a girl is told not to do. The Egyptian girl will have her clitoris removed and she has no say in this. Her father does not see value in girls. The girl wants to learn to read so she can pray and navigate through the world on her own.

SECTION I a: Pages 3-31 Analysis

The author Eve Ensler exposes the reader to multiple voices from varying backgrounds and perspectives. Yet there is common ground that runs through each girl's writing. All



of the girls are scared. They all feel alone. None of them feel in control, yet they all hope to find ways to rectify that.

The girl in the first poem speaks out loud. She is incensed by our ability to see so much injustice and suffering and do nothing. She tries to gain control by accepting that the responsibility will be hers to stand up and make a change. The pregnant girl tries to take control; she is contemplating abortion, despite her best friend and her mother thinking abortion is wrong. The Egyptian girl wants to read- she understands that education is a necessary step to being independent.

The girl who has a bad-boy boyfriend is split - she does everything she can to please her parents, and the stress drives her to cutting and bulimia. She tries to gain control by choosing another troubled soul like her to be her boyfriend.



SECTION I b: Pages 32-54

SECTION I b: Pages 32-54 Summary

One girl asks another girl questions - Would you rather... The other girl resists choosing between the two options presented.

A girl describes her infatuation with Stephanie. She insists she is neither gay nor straight but that it is specifically Stephanie that is pulling out these feeling in her.

A basketball player writes about the resentment she facing by playing basketball. But playing builds her confidence and she knows this is a venue where she can get control and have control.

Sophie and Apolline smoke as they speak of their lives and their friendship. Apolline's parents believe they have the perfect daughter and Apolline does everything in her power to keep that illusion intact. Sophie is freer, discussing sex with her father, who emphasizes being responsible. The girls dream of the future.

A girl lists the many contradictions she's heard about sex.

A poem called I Dance celebrates the freedom found in dancing, released from all of the stresses and expectations of who a girl should be.

SECTION I b: Pages 32-54 Analysis

The girl resists answering in would you rather because she should not have to choose between brilliant and beautiful, for example. This is reflective of niches presented to women, where women cannot define their own way but must adapt to someone else's idea of what a woman can be. The girl in love with Stephanie again exemplifies this point by stating twice that she is neither straight nor gay but attracted to this particular individual. She should not have to choose. The basketball player feels must choose between basketball and being a girl. Though she wrestles with her confidence, she finds freedom on the basketball court.

Sophie and Apolline are what many believe to be typical teenagers. Not in the popular crowd, the two girls are good, true friends.

I Dance is a celebration of female freedom, of being released from the chains of responsibility and the chains of expectations. The dancing is a way to gain control over girls' bodies and spirits.



SECTION IIa: Pages 57-80

SECTION IIa: Pages 57-80 Summary

Section II begins with a poem from a universal voice of all girls, seeking God, Allah, and understanding of the world.

An anorexic girl blogs about her disorder. She describes how bad food tastes, and how much she hates herself when she is forced to eat a meal. She is happy when she is skeletal, though her mother cries when she looks like the starving children on their tv. She is sent to a clinic for eating disorders. She tries to figure out what comes after anorexia.

An Iranian girl's parents have her nose altered without her being a part of the decision process. While the girl did have a large nose before, she liked it; it made her the person she was. Now that she is 'fake pretty' she must watch what she eats and act like a pretty girl. She misses her nose, and her sense of humor, which seems to have disappeared right along with it.

The girls resume the Would you rather questions. The girl still resists answering.

A girl writes a letter to the singer Rihanna, upset that Rihanna left her boyfriend Chris after he hit her. The girl feels that like her boyfriend Brad, and her dad, Chris hit Rihanna because they are sad and lonely and confused, and he deserves another chance. She feels that she can't just throw Brad overboard - she wants to help him change.

A girl is kicked out by her father, because she was raped by his friend. Her brother turns her away. She meets someone but he beats her. She turns to the police for help. They sell her into the sex trade. She is now sixteen years old. She has been there for two years. She is beaten when she does not comply. They threaten to kill her family if she tries to escape. This is a story, it is made clear, that is happening again and again all over the world.

SECTION IIa: Pages 57-80 Analysis

Section II deals specifically with issues adolescent girls face. This chunk covers anorexia, cosmetic surgery, physical abuse, and sex trade trafficking. All of these issues are connected to their family dynamic.

The girl with anorexia has parents who are actively involved in her life and they ensure she gets the help she needs to overcome the disorder. The Iranian girl's parents care so much about her that they do not want her to have to go through the hardship of not being pretty. Unfortunately, they do not take their daughter's wishes into account. The

girl whose father kicks her out becomes truly alone at a very young age, and without parents, the worst happens.

The girl who is being abused by her boyfriend is modeling her behavior on her mother's behavior; her father is still abusive yet her mother remains. She has a skewed sense of self and she has very low self-esteem. She further buys her father's stories that her mother treats him poorly and makes him feel bad about himself. She does not see the irony that in fact the exact opposite is going on.



SECTION IIb: Pages 81-104

SECTION IIb: Pages 81-104 Summary

A 13-year-old girl works in a factory in China making Barbie heads. She lives in horrible conditions and works 12 hours every day. She feels bad for Barbie. She wants to free her. She wants to free herself.

Next is a letter from a Palestinian woman to her dead lover. He was a suicide bomber, and she was going to follow in his footsteps but at the last minute she changed her mind. She is now in jail.

An Israeli girl is changed when she starts visiting the West Bank- the other side of the wall. As a result, she refuses to join the army.

A fifteen year old girl is taken by a soldier and held as his slave for the next two years. He rapes her several times a day. She finally escapes. Her advice is never to open up to him or feel sorry for him or start to care for him, to turn inward and protect yourself in an inner world, until an opportunity arises to flee.

Section 2 ends with the second installment of the poem I Dance, celebrating the freedom of dancing of all styles, from belly dancing to Sufi dancing to hip-hop.

SECTION IIb: Pages 81-104 Analysis

These monologues are spoken by strong girls who take their rightful place. They empower themselves. A girl finds ways to keep her integrity while she is held as a sex slave for two years. She refuses to use her captor's name, look at him as he rapes her, smile. She risks her life to break free from her captor. Another girl realizes the error of her path as she is about to detonate a suicide bomb, and she changes course. Yet another refuses to learn how to shoot a gun.

The Barbie story is powerful in that it highlights the disparity between the girls who make Barbies - working 12 hours a day, 6 days a week - and the girls who play with Barbies, who are far removed from such a life. The girl in the factory infuses Barbie with a desire to be free, the same desire she has to be free of the factory life.



SECTION III: Pages 107-144

SECTION III: Pages 107-144 Summary

The Refusers is a poem celebrating the girls and women who have stood up for their beliefs and spoken out, who have been killed in their pursuit of freedom, in their pursuit of emancipation.

Next, the positive aspects of being a girl are itemized. The list includes "Girls can create a life" and "girls are tender".

A girl voices her concerns about asking her boyfriend to use a condom. She is scared he will leave, won't call her again. But she bravely asks, and he is cool with it. He has one. Turns out this is the first time for both of them and they fumble their way through it together.

Would you rather picks up its third installment and the girl still avoids answering her friend's questions. She gets increasingly upset and voices that she doesn't want to have to choose between two "horrible impossible things."

Three short pieces follow. One is a list of things a girl likes about her body (dimples), another lists things that give us pleasure (gelato), and another is shouting to the world that wearing a short skirt does not imply one deserves to be raped or labeled a certain way.

Five Cows and a Calf is the story of Mary, who runs away when her father wants to sell her. She does not want to be sold, and she does not want her clitoris to be cut off. Mary runs to a safe-house many miles away, where she meets other girls who have broken the inevitable outcome of their futures. Miraculously Mary's mother is able to reform Mary's father to see another way for his daughters. The family reunites after a year. Mary's father can see the difference in his daughter after a year. She will become educated and will give back to the family more than he could have envisioned.

The poem I am an Emotional Creature celebrates the emotions and intuition of girls.

The poem I Dance continues in its third and final installment. Dancing unites girls of all stripes, of all religions and backgrounds. Dancing exudes fire and passion and anger and love.

An epilogue by the author lists what girls are told ("Don't be so intense") and then lists what the author wants girls to know ("Always fight back.")



SECTION III: Pages 107-144 Analysis

The girls portrayed in the final section are empowered. They have found the way to stand up and use their voices. Girls are embracing their emotions. They are staying true to their beliefs. They are fighting the good fight.

This section contains girls who are filled with self-love, not self-hate. Being female is seen as an advantage. Body image can be positive. Joining the movement to emancipate girls is brave and esteemed. Running away from an undeserving fate can bring great change.

Mary's story is significant in that her choice not only sets her on a different life path, but she positively affects the lives of her sisters, her mother, her father, and ultimately her community. Mary's choice will have an impact on generations to come within her community, and it is this strength that is so powerful, something all girls can strive towards.



Characters

Poem Writer (p. 3-9)

The voice in this poem is a sensitive girl who is outraged that things have gone so terribly wrong in the world. She points to the divide between the haves and have-nots, celebrities and people who are starving. She feels girls are "...desperate for a way/ to be awake without faking / to be alive without freaking" and they resort to anorexia, altering bodies, cutting, twittering, depression, pills. She sees the hypocrisy in society and the injustice all around. She knows something must change, and she is smart enough, and brave enough, to take a stand.

Wendy

Wendy is a girl who was in the popular group, but chooses to leave of her own accord. The popular girls dislike her now because of it. When the narrator of the story is ejected from the group, Wendy takes her in and cares for her.

Pregnant girl

Pregnant girl is scared and confused. She is in a Roman Catholic family so she hasn't broken the news yet to her parents. She does not know Carlos very well, who is the father. She can't imagine becoming a mother while she is still growing herself.

Egyptian girl

In her poem Don't, the Egyptian girl lists all the things she must not do: from expecting praise to wearing tight pants to fighting the razor. She feels helpless; her father hates girls, her brother beats her up and the doctor mutilates her genitals with full parental consent and support. Just not her consent. The girl is eager to join the larger world where she can be a full person.

Basketball player

The basketball player is from a mix of cultures. She feels she must take a stand of which parts of her to foster and which to let go, when really she just wants to play basketball and be herself. She finds that the only thing holding her back on the court are the voices in her head but she moves past the mental blocks and plays freely.



Girl with Anorexia

The girl with anorexia understands that she has an eating disorder but is addicted to it nonetheless. She sees a warped view of herself and she can't understand what will replace her anorexia as the one thing she feels gives her control and beauty in her life.

Girl who writes to Rihanna

This girl has grown up watching her father hit her mother, and now she too is in an abusive relationship with her boyfriend Brad. She tries to reason with Rihanna why she should take Chris back. She needs to believe that staying with Brad is right, and she will be able to believe that if Rihanna stays with her abusive boyfriend.

Worker in Barbie factory

This 13-year-old girl feels bad for Barbie. She sees that Barbie cannot walk away, that she is forced to say things she does not mean, and she is hard plastic, not cuddly. This girl works 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, and she thinks Barbie feels bad for the girls who make her and the girls who try to emulate her. She is seeking Barbie's freedom as well as her own.

Palestinian girl

This girl was deeply in love with her boyfriend. She loved his passion for his cause. But after he detonated a suicide bomb, he was in pieces and she could not embrace that. She is then guided to become a suicide bomber herself and join her boyfriend in a martyr's death, but the process is hasty and before she knows it, the moment has arrived. And then she sees the faces of the Israeli people and realizes they are simply people, like her, like her boyfriend. And she abandons the mission.

Girl taken as a slave

This girl does not realize that going on a two-day vacation will turn into a two-year nightmare. She is taken as a sex slave and raped repeatedly every day. This eventually results in having a child. She is careful not to feel anything for her captor, though at times it is tempting. After two years, she is wiped out. Yet when the opportunity arises to flee, she takes it and never looks back. She is strong and resilient and cannot believe everything she has lived through.

Mary

Mary is a Masai girl living in Kenya. When her father wants to sell her to an old man for a dowry of five cows and a calf, Mary chooses a different future for herself and runs



away. Throughout the year she spends at the safe-house, she becomes less scared, more confident, and she blossoms. When she is reunited with her family, she is relieved and surprised and thrilled that her father will let her come back into the family. He agrees not to sell her or insist on genital her mutilation, and this goes for her sisters as well.



Objects/Places

Barbies

A child makes Barbies day in and day out in a factory, where she lives in depressing conditions. The Barbies get sent to children who pay more for the Barbie than the child makes in a week.

The child identifies with Barbie, sympathizes with her, as she feels Barbie is imprisoned like she is. She wonders what the world would be like if all billion Barbies in existence set themselves free. This echoes the power girls could have if they choose to set themselves free.

School

One girl speaks of the pressure to keep up with the popular girls when she is in school. Another girl speaks of her parent's expectations for her grades in school. And Mary, who was not expected to receive an education, will be given that chance.

Israel

The story of the suicide bomber and his girlfriend takes place in Israel, as does the story of the Israeli girl who refuses to join the army and take up arms against the Arabic community.

Kenya

Mary's story takes place in Kenya. Mary is part of the Masai tribe, a nomadic community. Mary is one of many children, and when the drought hit, her father was going to sell her for some cows. Mary ran away and changed her future because of it.

Dance floor

"I am an Emotional Creature" contains a three-part poem called I Dance. Dancing, in these verses, is a celebration of life, of freedom, of anger and rage and fire and love. It is the energy that gets released without thought, without rules or obligations or expectations. It is a world in which one can get lost in the music.

Letters

Some of the monologues in this collection are written as letters. In one such letter, a girl in an abusive relationship writes to Rihanna (the singer.) She would feel better about



her own choices if she can only convince Rihanna to take back her partner who had physically abused her.

Another letter is written or spoken to a girl's dead lover. He died as a suicide bomber, and she misses him, and she loves him, and she is not pleased that his body is in pieces. She explains to him that when it was her turn to do the same, she instead saw the light, the sky, the miracle of life.

Jail

Imprisonment is woven throughout the stories. Sometimes the jail is physical, as is the case with the Palestinian girl. Sometimes it is physical but not called a jail, as is the case with the factory worker, or the girl who was taken into sexual slavery. And sometimes, the jail is the internal barriers the girls face, such as the basketball player's doubts, or the girl who feels she must have just the right boots.

Short Skirts

One poem emphasizes that girls have the right to wear short skirts without being perceived as sluts, or as deserving to be raped. A girl can wear a short skirt simply because she wants to, and this does not give up her rights as a person.

Factory

The girl who makes Barbies works in a factory for long hours, though she is only 13 years old. She also lives at the factory. She feels this is a jail for her, yet she is at the same time desperate to keep her job there, as the alternative seems to be worse.

Bodies

Many girls within these pages grapple with the ownership of their own bodies. One girl is kept as an unwilling prostitute, beaten when she refuses men. Another is raped by her captor repeatedly. Girls even inflict their own wounds, from cutting to anorexia.



Themes

Empowerment

Girls face many pressures, some external and some self-imposed. The stories contained in "I am an Emotional Creature" call out to girls to release themselves from these shackles. Embrace your body. Ignore popularity. Stand up for your beliefs. Dress the way you want. Accept that you have feelings which should be celebrated, not buried.

Girls across the world grapple with countless obstacles. Many of these obstacles are specific to others' perceptions of what girls should and shouldn't do or be. Eve Ensler, the author, challenges girls to empower themselves and embrace who they really are, even if this does not match what they are being told by society/their friends/their parents. She wants girls to find that their greatest strengths may appear as weaknesses to others, but compassion, caring, tenderness, fire are all traits that can affect much-needed change in our society.

Intervention

Girls cannot combat all obstacles on their own. International challenges of child labor, sex slavery and human trafficking will continue unless people step up. Ensler wants girls to be outraged, to take to the streets, to say this is wrong. She wants to ignite the fire that lies within each girl.

Equally important are the many ways girls hurt themselves, from anorexia to cutting. Girls partake in a wealth of behaviors to release the stress they constantly feel. The anorexic girl receives parental intervention and they get her to an eating disorder clinic.

Breaking the Cycle

There are several stories that point to the importance of breaking a cycle. The girl in an abusive relationship believes it is ok to stay because she has witnessed her father abuse her mother as she grew up- it is all she knows. She will likely continue to perpetuate the cycle with her children.

Contrast that with Mary in Kenya, who pulls away from expectations and demands more for her life. She breaks with tradition, running away instead of obeying her father when he sells her in exchange for some cows. Mary's story has a happy ending. She breaks the cycle not only of being sold but also of female circumcision for her and her sisters. Her community celebrates this.

Style

Point of View

"I am an Emotional Creature" is a collection of monologues: one person speaking to an audience. Each piece is a different girl speaking in the first person singular. This provides the reader with the opportunity to hear many different takes on being a girl and what girls grapple with around the globe.

Some of the poetic pieces are almost choral in nature: The speaker is not an individual girl but a voice that represents all girls.

There are some pieces that involve two voices: Would You Rather is two girls speaking to each other. The reader does not hear their thoughts, just the words they say out loud to each other. Segments of this piece are within each of the three sections of the book.

Setting

The monologues contained in this book take place in a vast array of places around the world. Most of the monologues are not country-specific. This emphasizes the universality of the story- that really, the story could be set on any continent and ring equally true.

Other stories are tied to specific countries: Kenya, China, the United States, Egypt, France, Iran, Bulgaria, Palestine, Israel, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These reflect the differing realities between environments where girls are fostered to become educated, strong, independent women, and environments that expose girls to child-labor, being sold into prostitution, slavery, and genital mutilation.

Language and Meaning

Each story is presented as a monologue, yet many of the pieces are written as poems. The poem structure helps provide a rhythm to how the girl would be speaking. It also allows thoughts to float through, sometimes without a linear, forward-moving path.

In this book, Eve Ensler emphasizes words that capture being a girl. Not logical rational dull careful words, but passionate and emotional words.

Structure

"I am an Emotional Creature" is divided into three sections. Each section contains a series of monologues, but there are two pieces that recur in each section: I Dance is a

poem, a part of which is found at the end of each section. Would you rather is a dialogue between two girls, threaded throughout each section.

The first section contains 14 monologues, while Sections 2 and 3 hold 11 monologues each. The book concludes with an Epilogue, where the author speaks directly to girls.



Quotes

"Why is everyone so much more afraid of sex than SCD missiles? And who decided God wasn't into pleasure?" (p. 4)

"Is there anyone in charge? Or is this whole thing spinning out until it explodes or dissolves? And if there is something we can do why aren't we doing it?" (p. 7)

"My father hates girls He says they used to bury them when they were born. (p. 30)

"I want a girl because she's cute. She will be a princess. Beautiful clothes. No problems." (p. 48)

"I dance past your lustful eyes
Your dirty interpretations of my teenage body
I shake off the burqas and bindings
and corsets and diets
I shake off restrictions and illegitimate rules
I shake off your suffocating warnings
I dance to the heartbeat of life." (p. 54)

"And my father took my hand and said, "You will be a princess now," and I said, "I don't want to be a princess. I was happy being a clown. My nose protruded but it gave me history and mystery [...] I was once Mesopotamia and now I'm a mall."" (p. 66)

"I mean Chris used to wet his bed after his stepdad hit his mother. What are we gonna do, throw all the boys away?" (p. 72)

"Barbie isn't who you think she is. She's so much smarter than they will let her be. She's got great powers and is kind of a genius." (p. 85)

"I do that.
I make people up.
I make up what they think
and how they will respond." (p. 117)

"We were the girls who left our father's house. We were the girls who changed tradition."
(p. 131)



Topics for Discussion

Who speaks in this collection? What traits do girls commonly share? How are these traits beneficial to girls? How are they detrimental to girls? What do you think the author thinks about girls' natural tendencies?

Why does the girl write to Rihanna to take back her boyfriend? What is her reasoning for staying with her own boyfriend? What do you think will happen next in her life? What can she do to change this?

What happens to the Iranian girl? Why is she so upset that she will no longer look the same? Is this a common viewpoint? How do you feel about this viewpoint?

According to the factory worker, how does Barbie really feel? What pressures does Barbie exert on North American girls? What does Barbie represent in this book? How do you feel about Barbie?

The first poem questions why students aren't protesting, aren't speaking out against injustice. What forms of injustice are identified throughout these stories? Why do you feel students aren't protesting? What do you feel should be done?

What tribe does Mary belong to? What happens to her? Why is Mary's story so remarkable? Why do you think her story comes near the end of the book? In your opinion, is there logic for the way the stories are ordered?

Why does the author choose to have the girls speaking from their own perspective rather than having a narrator writing about their lives?

Why does the girl object to the Would you rather questions? Why does it bother her so much?