

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

INSIDE HENRY CATO

a novel by Katharine English

About the Book

Henry Cato begins his childhood in smalltown Kansas in the 1960s, locked for hours or days at a time in his mother's root cellar for infractions real and imagined. There, in the dark, he learns to build worlds out of almost nothing — first an imaginary kingdom of critters, then a hidden cache of his sister Lily's stolen shoes, the first objects that let him imagine becoming someone else entirely.

When Henry finally leaves Kansas, barely sixteen, he lands first in the sun-bleached idealism of San Francisco's counterculture, where an exploitative relationship with a magnetic impresario nearly costs him everything — until a visit to New York and a stranger named Xander pull him out and into the rough, reinventive world of the Meatpacking District. There, among hustlers and dreamers, entrepreneurs, and fellow outsiders, Henry begins to build the beauty he once felt he could only steal: first a single storefront, and eventually a global shoe empire.

Narrated by Henry himself, now in his seventies and looking back across more than fifty years, *Inside Henry Cato* is a novel about the costs and rewards of self-invention — about what it means to build an identity when the one you were given nearly destroys you.

Behind the Book

Inside Henry Cato began as a short story, eventually evolving into Katharine's thesis project for an MLA in Creative Writing at Harvard University. It pulls directly from Katharine's own experiences growing up in smalltown Kansas, her years in San Francisco, and her love of New York, the city she calls home today. The novel took shape over several years of revision as Katharine, a longtime tech and media professional, transitioned into a full-time creative life.

Discussion Questions

SPOILER ALERT *The questions that follow reference plot details throughout the novel, including its ending. Best saved for after your group has finished reading.*

1. Henry's fixation on shoes begins as an impulsive act of sibling revenge — stealing Lily's Mary Janes out of spite. At what point does the novel show that act shifting into something deeper, a means of self-discovery rather than payback? What does that shift suggest about how children build a sense of self under conditions of deprivation?

- 2.** In the root cellar, young Henry names the creatures around him and invents a whole imaginary kingdom, “The 444.” How does this early act of imagination-as-survival echo later in the novel — at The Lode, in Henry’s relationship with performance and reinvention, and eventually in his life as a shoemaker?
- 3.** Early in the novel, we learn the brutal circumstances of Ida Rae Miller’s own birth and upbringing — details Henry himself doesn’t discover until much later in life. How does that generational backstory reframe your understanding of Henry’s mother? Does knowing where her cruelty came from change how you feel about it?
- 4.** Lily is cast as Henry’s tormentor throughout childhood, favored and privileged where Henry is punished and hidden away. By the novel’s end, she’s become a lawyer, wife, and devoted mother of two. What do you make of her transformation — and how does it complicate the role she plays in the book’s early chapters?
- 5.** The cross-country trip to San Francisco with Jesse, Frank, and Carol is full of comic, almost picaresque detail — a seedy motel room, a territorial cat, a wrong bridge. How does Katharine use humor in this stretch of the novel, and what work does it do heading into the darker chapters that follow?
- 6.** Del and Cherub offer Henry access to art, glamour, and something like family — but the relationship curdles into exploitation and abuse. How does the novel handle this without reducing Henry to a passive victim? Where do you see him exercising agency, however limited, even inside that relationship?
- 7.** Xander pulls Henry out of Del and Cherub’s orbit, but he’s frank about his own unreliability from the start: “You probably shouldn’t [trust me],” he tells Henry in the cab. Is Xander a straightforward savior figure, or does the novel complicate that role too?
- 8.** Trixie turns discarded fabric and secondhand materials into couture — a clear mirror of what Henry does with stolen and salvaged shoes. What does the novel suggest, through both of their work, about beauty made out of scarcity and refuse?
- 9.** Perry’s storyline runs parallel to Henry’s own: an Army enlistee sent almost immediately to Vietnam, he loses a limb and eventually builds a company that creates prosthetics so lifelike “you’d never believe they weren’t made of flesh.” How do Henry’s shoes and Perry’s prosthetics speak to each other as two different responses to the body, damage, and reinvention?
- 10.** Dreams punctuate the novel at four key moments — the Ambassador Hotel in L.A., The Plaza (where Eloise first appears), Henry’s visit to Perry at Walter Reed, and a final sequence on the eve of launching his shoe line, when Eloise returns. Why might the author use dreams instead of description in these scenes? Do the four moments have anything in common? What work does Eloise’s reprisal do in the last one that a new dream figure couldn’t?
- 11.** The novel closes with Henry declaring, “I am not the destination. I am the space in-between.” How do you read that line as the culmination of the shoe motif — and of Henry’s philosophy of identity as a whole?

- 12.** Henry remains deliberately vague about who he loved and desired over the decades: “If you need more than that, you haven’t been paying attention.” Why might the author have chosen a narrator who withholds this, even at the end of his own story?
- 13.** Consider the range of adult lives on display by the novel’s close: Lily’s conventional family, Trixie’s chosen family, Perry’s mission-driven career, Henry’s solitary, unconventional path. What does the novel seem to suggest about the many shapes a fulfilled adult life can take?
- 14.** Henry learns of Del’s 1988 death from a sanitized obituary and chooses not to feel vindicated, even offering him a kind of forgiveness. Why do you think the author has Henry withhold judgment here, after everything Del put him through?
- 15.** The novel is narrated by Henry looking back from his seventies across more than fifty years. How does that frame shape your reading of the more painful chapters? Would the novel work differently told strictly in chronological order, without an older Henry’s hindsight?

Passages Worth Reading Aloud

A few moments that reward slowing down and reading together — useful starting points if your group wants to look closely at the author’s prose rather than just discuss plot.

“People look at me, the silver-haired man in the bespoke suit... and they see success. Substance. They see the name Cato on boutiques from Manhattan to Lisbon and assume I simply emerged, tailored and complete, into the light. But my journey began in darkness, over fifty years ago, locked in a root cellar that smelled of damp earth and rotting potatoes, ten feet below the Kansas topsoil.” — Opening pages

“By taking Lily’s shoes, I believed I was taking Mother’s hope and keeping it for myself... It was the first time I felt powerful. It was the moment I stopped being a victim and started being the architect of my own destiny.” — Chapter 1

“I am my mother’s son, after all. Both of us entered the world facing obstacles and shortages that we eventually overcame... I am not the destination. I am the space in-between.” — Closing pages

Historical & Cultural Context

Book clubs unfamiliar with the eras Henry moves through may find it useful to touch on a few threads before or during discussion:

- The Vietnam-era draft, which shapes Perry’s arc and looms over Henry’s own choices as a young man leaving Kansas.
- San Francisco’s late-1960s counterculture — Haight-Ashbury, Berkeley, the Free Store movement, and the broader “dropping out” ethos Henry initially romanticizes.
- New York’s Meatpacking District before its transformation — an industrial, after-hours neighborhood that was also home to a vibrant queer and trans nightlife scene, well before the high-fashion district it is today.

- The AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which shadows the novel's later chapters, including Del's death and its sanitized cause.

Suggested Playlist

Music of the era Henry moves through — from the Summer of Love to the Factory scene to early punk.

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| 1. <i>Somebody to Love</i> — Jefferson Airplane | 18. <i>Light My Fire</i> — The Doors |
| 2. <i>White Rabbit</i> — Jefferson Airplane | 19. <i>Break On Through</i> — The Doors |
| 3. <i>For What It's Worth</i> — Buffalo Springfield | 20. <i>Gimme Shelter</i> — The Rolling Stones (<i>Let It Bleed</i>) |
| 4. <i>Both Sides Now</i> — Joni Mitchell | 21. <i>Midnight Rambler</i> — The Rolling Stones (<i>Let It Bleed</i>) |
| 5. <i>Suzanne</i> — Leonard Cohen | 22. <i>You Can't Always Get What You Want</i> — The Rolling Stones (<i>Let It Bleed</i>) |
| 6. <i>The Sound of Silence</i> — Simon & Garfunkel | 23. <i>Baba O'Riley</i> — The Who |
| 7. <i>Diamonds & Rust</i> — Joan Baez | 24. <i>Won't Get Fooled Again</i> — The Who |
| 8. <i>Fixin'-to-Die Rag</i> — Country Joe & the Fish | 25. <i>Mississippi Queen</i> — Mountain |
| 9. <i>Ripple</i> — Grateful Dead | 26. <i>Sweet Jane</i> — The Velvet Underground |
| 10. <i>Box of Rain</i> — Grateful Dead | 27. <i>Rock & Roll</i> — The Velvet Underground |
| 11. <i>Uncle John's Band</i> — Grateful Dead | 28. <i>Kick Out the Jams</i> — MC5 |
| 12. <i>Piece of My Heart</i> — Big Brother and the Holding Company | 29. <i>Tutti Frutti</i> — MC5 |
| 13. <i>Summertime</i> — Big Brother and the Holding Company | 30. <i>1970</i> — The Stooges (<i>Fun House</i>) |
| 14. <i>Mr. Tambourine Man</i> — The Byrds | 31. <i>T.V. Eye</i> — The Stooges |
| 15. <i>Eight Miles High</i> — The Byrds | 32. <i>Personality Crisis</i> — New York Dolls |
| 16. <i>Purple Haze</i> — Jimi Hendrix | 33. <i>Trash</i> — New York Dolls |
| 17. <i>All Along the Watchtower</i> — Jimi Hendrix | 34. <i>Born to Lose</i> — New York Dolls |

Signature Cocktail



Henry's Old-Fashioned

Henry's take on the classic Old-Fashioned lets the whiskey shine through as the star of the show — made the old-fashioned way, and directly in the glass.

- 2 oz quality bourbon or rye whiskey — when it's the star ingredient, it's gotta be good
- 1 tsp sugar or one sugar cube
- 3 dashes Angostura bitters
- 1 tsp water (if using a sugar cube)
- Ice (a large "bar rock" if you've got one; otherwise a handful of cubes)
- An orange twist for garnish

Place the sugar in the glass and add the bitters. If using a cube, add your teaspoon of water. Use a muddler or a spoon to blend it all together, coating the bottom of the glass. Add your ice cube(s), and then the whiskey. Stir well to ensure the sugar and bitters are blended with the whiskey, eliminate any remaining granules, and to chill the drink. Add a touch more water if needed. Twist the orange peel over the glass to release its oil, drop it in, and voilà!

Connect with the Author



Katharine is available for virtual book club visits. If your group would like to schedule a conversation with the author, please reach out through the contact form provided on Katharine's website, or through DM on Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn.

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