

## A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet Ohio author Leah Stewart and learn about her books.

Select from a range of discussion questions and activities to deepen the experience of reading and sharing ***The History of Us***.

Discover websites and companion books to explore topics and themes in depth.

# The History of Us

By Leah Stewart



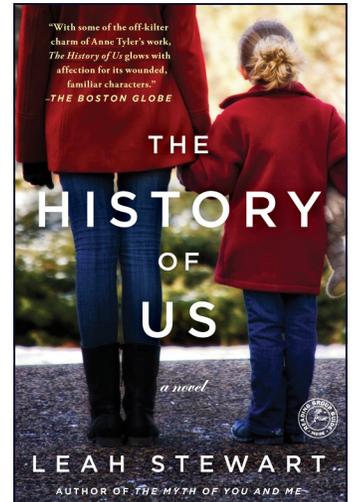
## About the Book

In this novel about three grown siblings, the aunt who took them in as children, and the family's old house in Cincinnati, Stewart creates a deeply moving story of love, loss, family, and the paths not taken.

Eloise Hempel is on her way to teach a class at Harvard when she receives devastating news. Her sister and her husband have been killed in a tragic accident, and Eloise must return home to Cincinnati to take their three children, Theodora, Josh, and Claire, out of the hands of her own incapable mother. She moves back into her mother's 120-year-old house and, after her mother leaves, pours her own money into its upkeep.

Nearly two decades later, Eloise is still in that house, still thinking about what she left behind. With Claire, the youngest child, leaving for New York City for a promising ballet career, Eloise has plans to finally embark on a life that's hers alone. But when her mother makes a competition out of who inherits the house, and Claire reveals a life-changing secret, their makeshift family begins to fall apart. Stewart confronts the question: What do we owe to the people who raised us, and the people we raised?

In ***The History of Us***, Stewart captures the spirit of Cincinnati, her adopted city. Through her characters' relationship to the city, Stewart examines how where you live defines who you are.



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## Book Details

***The History of Us*** by Leah Stewart.

Simon & Schuster, 2013, ISBN 9781451672626.

<http://books.simonandschuster.com/The-History-of-Us/Leah-Stewart/9781451672633>

Available through the State Library of Ohio Talking Book Program:

<http://www.klas.com/talkingbooks/ohio>.

Available as an ebook and digital audiobook through the Ohio Digital Library:

<http://ohdbks.lib.overdrive.com>



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## About the Author

Leah Stewart is the critically acclaimed author of *The History of Us*, *Husband and Wife*, *The Myth of You and Me*, and *Body of a Girl*. The recipient of a Sachs Fund Prize and a NEA Literature Fellowship, she teaches in the creative writing program at the University of Cincinnati and lives in Cincinnati with her husband and two children.

## Author Resources

### Leah Stewart's Official Website

<http://leahstewart.com>

### Author Page on Simon & Schuster Website

<http://authors.simonandschuster.com/Leah-Stewart/401312089>

### Leah Stewart digs into *The History of Us* (video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl49cMKcCxs>

### Steve Bertrand interview with Leah Stewart (video)

[http://www.thalo.com/shared\\_videos/view/777/steve\\_bertrand\\_leah\\_stewart](http://www.thalo.com/shared_videos/view/777/steve_bertrand_leah_stewart)

Bertrand, host of Barnes and Noble.com's Meet the Writers and news anchor and host at WGN Radio in Chicago, interviews Leah Stewart about Cincinnati and the process of developing the characters and writing *The History of Us*.

### For publicity and speaking engagement inquiries:

Contact Leah Stewart at [leahcstewart@gmail.com](mailto:leahcstewart@gmail.com).

**"Were they worth it? All the sleep she'd lost. All the time. All the vanished possibilities. The move home. The less prestigious job. Maybe not, if you took out emotion, if you made it a balance sheet."**

## Talk About It

*Topics to share when discussing The History of Us.*

**Spoiler warning! Some discussion questions refer to key events in the book. Do not read if you do not want to find out what happens.**

Why did Eloise return to Cincinnati rather than have Theo, Josh, and Claire move to Boston? Do you think she made the right decision? Why or why not? What would you have done if you were in Eloise's position?

Describe Eloise's individual relationships with Theo, Josh, and Claire. What makes each relationship unique? What are the specific strains on each relationship? Do you think Eloise treats her adopted nieces and nephew differently? Did any of these relationships remind you of relationships in your own life?

Eloise "tried without success to break Theo of her fondness for their hometown." (p. 24) Why is Eloise adamant that Theo leave Cincinnati? Why does Theo believe that Josh, but not she herself, "should be in a bigger city" and "leading a bigger life" (p. 57)?

What does the house "on Clifton Avenue near the intersection with Lafayette" (p. 15) symbolize to each character? Do you think Eloise's desire to be "unburdened" (p. 76) by it due more to financial or emotional considerations? Have you ever felt a similar, conflicted connection to a certain place or city?

## Talk About It (continued)

How is Claire's departure a turning point for Eloise, Theo, and Josh? Why does Claire not tell her family about her change of plans? Do you think Theo, Josh, and Eloise were more upset by her decision to quit ballet or by her deception?

Discuss Francine's character. What were your initial reactions to her? How did she change over the course of the novel? What were her motivations for creating a "competition" for the house? Why does Eloise ultimately come to sympathize her mother?

Why does Eloise insist on keeping her relationship with Heather a secret from her family and her colleagues? Is she ashamed of being in a romantic relationship with a woman, as Heather claims?

In what ways is Eloise's trip to Chicago a pivotal moment for her? Why does she ultimately decide to stay in Cincinnati? Do you think she makes this choice for Heather, for her family, or for herself?

What kind of responsibility, if any, do parents have for their adult children? Are Eloise's responsibilities for her grown-up nieces and nephew less since, as she says, she "inherited" them? What are your thoughts about Eloise's assertion that Theo feels entitled to the house "because, these days in America, not until children have children of their own do they feel any gratitude to the people who raised them"? (p. 130)

Discuss the way Cincinnati is described and portrayed. Have you ever visited or lived in Cincinnati? Did you think the descriptions were accurate? Discuss the connection between identity and place. How does the place where you live define you as a person? How has your setting affected your life?

In what ways are each of the characters at a crossroads in their lives—both regarding their careers and romantic relationships? How does the loss of their parents continue to affect Theo, Josh, and Claire in adulthood and influence the decisions they make?

**The History of Us** concludes with some significant issues in the characters' lives left unresolved. What do you think the future holds for Eloise, Theo, Josh, and Claire? Do you think **The History of Us** is an accurate portrayal of family relationships?

Discussion questions courtesy Simon & Schuster, from *The History of Us Reading Group Guide*, [http://books.simonandschuster.com/History-of-Us/Leah-Stewart/9781451672633/reading\\_group\\_guide](http://books.simonandschuster.com/History-of-Us/Leah-Stewart/9781451672633/reading_group_guide). Used with permission. The *Reading Group Guide*, which includes more discussion questions and a conversation with Leah Stewart, may also be found in the paperback edition of **The History of Us**.

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## Go Further

*Ideas for extending the experience of reading **The History of Us**.*

Theo meets up with Noah at the Cincinnati History Museum, where they explore a model of the city. To take a virtual tour through the nation's largest full-motion urban layout, visit <https://www.cincymuseum.org/history/motion>.

Bake some brown sugar cookies, like Heather does for Eloise and her family, to bring to your book club meeting or literary program. Find recipes in the cookbook collection at your local library or online. Here is a recipe from Epicurious: <http://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/brown-sugar-cookies-367569>.

Watch video, browse through rehearsal pictures, and learn more about the Cincinnati Ballet company by visiting <http://www.cballet.org/explore/watch>. Consider going to a performance by your city's local ballet or dance company with your book club members or library group.

Extension activities courtesy of Simon & Schuster, from *The History of Us Reading Group Guide*, [http://books.simonandschuster.com/History-of-Us/Leah-Stewart/9781451672633/reading\\_group\\_guide](http://books.simonandschuster.com/History-of-Us/Leah-Stewart/9781451672633/reading_group_guide). Used with permission.

## Check It Out

Companion books and films for *The History of Us*.

Some other novels that explore similar themes include:

**What Alice Forgot** by Liane Moriarty (2012)

**Me Before You** by Jojo Moyes (2013)

**A Spool of Blue Thread** by Anne Tyler (2015)

**The Odds: A Love Story** by Stewart O'Nan (2012)

**All Fall Down** by Jennifer Weiner (2014)

**The One & Only** by Emily Giffin (2014)

**We Are Not Ourselves** by Matthew Thomas (2014)

**Leaving Haven** by Kathleen McCleary (2013)

**Two Kisses for Maddy: A Memoir of Loss & Love** (nonfiction) by Matt Logelin (2011)

If Leah Stewart's evocation of the city of Cincinnati has you wanting to visit, consider these guides:

**Walking Cincinnati : 32 Tours Exploring Historic Neighborhoods, Stunning Riverfront Quarters, and Hidden Treasures in the Queen City** by Danny Korman and Katie Meyer (2015)

**Walking the Steps of Cincinnati: A Guide to the Queen City's Scenic and Historic Secrets** by Mary Anna DuSablón (2014)

**Cincinnati Revealed: A Photographic Heritage of the Queen City** (2002)

## Explore More

Additional ideas and resources to use with *The History of Us*.

### Pew Research Center: Family and Relationships

<http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/family-and-relationships/>

Social trends, surprising facts, and fascinating research about the state of the American family, from multigenerational households, to shifting gender roles, to perceptions about family size.

### My Hometown

<http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/lens-my-hometown/>

This project of the *New York Times* collects photographs submitted by teens around the United States, documenting their communities, homes, and schools.

### This Old House

<http://www.thisoldhouse.com>

The well-known home improvement brand includes television shows and a magazine, plus this extensive website of projects, galleries, discussion forums, and advice.

### City of Cincinnati

<http://www.cincinnati-oh.gov>

The city's official website offers information and resources on topics including historic conservation, city planning, and events and attractions for visitors.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits:

<http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>.

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