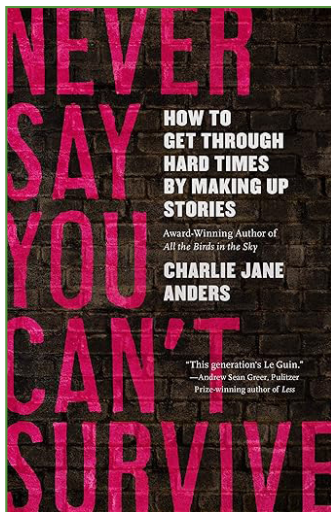




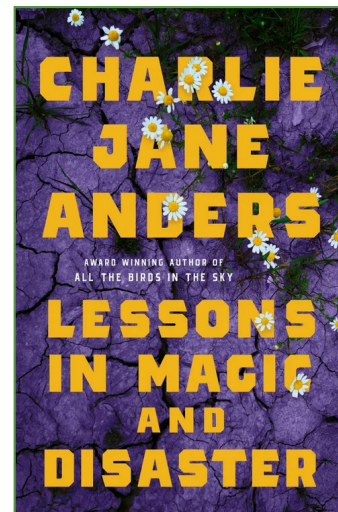
Reading Charlie Jane Anders'
Never Say You Can't Survive
and
Lessons in Magic and Disaster
together at a time of rising hostility to trans folks,
a review of the books and the process

by Tiffany Sostar, Aakhil Lakhani and April Wick

With contributions from Maile Grace, LJ Boyes, KJ Wiseheart, Evren Salja and Heather Moore

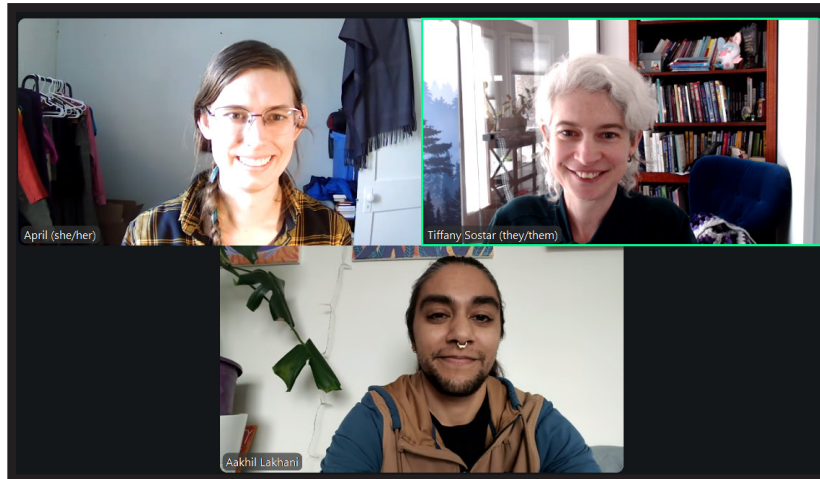


Charlie Jane Anders



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Abstract

A group of friends reviews Charlie Jane Anders' (2021) nonfiction book *Never Say You Can't Survive: How to get through hard times by making up stories* and her (2025) novel *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*, and reflects on the process of reading these books together. We found it sustaining to be in community with each other, engaging richly and intentionally with the vibrant work of a trans author, as a group of mostly trans and nonbinary readers, at a time of rising hostility to trans folks. We found significant resonance between narrative therapy and the practices outlined in *Never Say You Can't Survive* and meaningful opportunities for therapeutic conversations sparked by the characters and story in *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*.

Key words: *book clubs; trans; transgender; book review; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

It seemed like no matter the state in which I came into the conversations, I felt uplifted afterwards. There's something joyful about spending this time together doing something that is value aligned, sharing time and space for this collective purpose, that was really rejuvenating. –Aakhil

Between June and December 2025, a group of us got together in video calls and a text chat to read Charlie Jane Anders' books *Never Say You Can't Survive* and *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*. Most of us in the group are trans or nonbinary, and are concerned about and affected by the current political context of rising fascism and hostility to trans people¹ and others who are being targeted by legislative and state violence and hostile dominant discourses.

Reading books by trans authors at a time like this can be a political act. When the world is presenting a thin and dehumanising story of what it means to be trans and restricting access to possibilities for trans life, intentionally engaging with books by trans authors is a way of refusing to accept that dominant narrative as an unexamined truth. But reading books by trans authors is also just *enjoyable*.

As Kai Cheng Thom and Maya Deane write about trans women's books specifically:

Trans women's fiction is weird, funny, endlessly inventive, nothing like the eat-your-vegetables morality plays that so many readers expect. Those who know how to read it love it. It's neither alien nor unrelatable; it's gorgeous and human, and since it had to overcome the headwinds that keep trans women out of publishing, it tends to be very good. But you have to make an effort to see it, to read it, to encounter its surprise and delight. (Deane & Thom, 2024)

We are an international group, with readers in the United States, Canada, Australia and Portugal. Some of us had known each other for years and shared space in many different contexts, and other people met during the book club.

Participation in the group was flexible. Some people attended every call and participated in the text chat, while other people attended only a few calls, or engaged with the chat but not the calls, and other people read the books but didn't participate in either the video calls or the chat. After each video call, Tiffany wrote up a brief recap of the conversation and shared it in the chat. This flexible participation format was an intentional effort to make the group a welcoming space.

Reading these books together allowed us to acknowledge and talk about the current political context, without our focus being narrowed to the dread and despair that can overtake us sometimes.

It made a difference, being in a space where we're engaging with work by a trans author, reading complex stories that are not *just* about the trans experience but are inclusive of trans experience. The politics are there, but they're not the only thing. And we're doing that together, so the politics can be part of our conversations as well. Reading the books together had me thinking about my own life, my relationships, thinking about my values and what I care about in new ways. As I was reading the books, I was thinking about [the book club members] and what you might be thinking about it. Our conversations stayed with me. –Tiffany

Just having a group of people that you're reading with, you end up reading something different than you would, or you analyse it differently. There is value in that community. –April

I will admit that [*Lessons in Magic and Disaster*] is not a book that I would have otherwise picked up and read. It's quite outside the genres that I tend to read, and that turned out to be a lovely thing. Exposure to a new author that I really appreciated, some excellent writing and also widening my own criteria for how I might consider choosing a book to read. –Aakhil

Never Say You Can't Survive

Visualizing a happier, more just world is a direct assault on the forces that are trying to break your heart. (Anders, 2021, p. 2)

Imagination is always a form of resistance to domination and oppression, and we've all been saved by other people's stories one time or another. (Anders, 2021, p. 6)

We started with *Never Say You Can't Survive: How to get through hard times by making up stories* (NSYCS).

We read one section each week and then met to talk about that section and do some of the writing exercises together. Each of the five sections includes personal anecdotes from Anders' life as a writer, with a focus on how creative writing and storytelling has helped her get through hard times. There is a strong focus on politics, and how imagination can be a critical tool in resisting injustice and hardship. We also appreciated the way Anders resists thin and totalising ideas about representation and the politics of telling other people's stories – this is a book that helped us strengthen our own skills in solidarity and collective care.

Some of us are narrative practitioners, and we found significant resonance between NSYCS and narrative practice², even though it's not a narrative therapy book.

When I think of narrative therapy being tied to ideas of justice and social activism, I think of defying and recreating and irreverence to dominant discourses and ideas. So much of my work is heavy and intense, and [I appreciated] being able to interact with a book that did not shy away from serious and important topics, but there was never a moment where I felt that heaviness, it felt so uplifting. It feels so important to have joyful things that bring us together and are still doing this important work. –Maile

One of the first things Anders does is what Vikki Reynolds might call “people-ing the room” (2011),

and she continues to do this throughout the book. Anders writes about some of the relationships that have shaped her own life as a writer, especially her relationship with Ms Pennington.

I was this heedless daydreamer, a mumbling oddity who slouched around the schoolyard making up stories in my head instead of talking to other kids. I had imaginary friends, and imaginary adventures, and a whole imaginary life. Ms. Pennington turned my tendency to daydream into a tool for getting me to learn. And in the process, she made me into a lifelong storytelling addict. (2021, p. 53)

The first chapter is about imaginary friends and what makes an interesting and engaging imaginary friend. Although these friends may go on to become characters in a story, that's not the main point of this chapter. The point is a reflection on how useful it can be to have “an imaginary posse” (p. 18) on our side.

These ideas for how to create or get to know an imaginary friend, and the potential value of these friends, have significant resonance with Michael White's idea that “it is possible to work with people around the invention of an invisible friend, and at times it is even possible to resurrect people's relationships with invisible friends” (1995, p. 137).

For narrative practitioners who want to bring White's ideas about the value of invisible or imaginary friends into therapeutic conversations, Anders' book has some great ideas for how to go about it.

The focus on relationships continues throughout the book. It resonates with narrative ideas about relationships being critical to a person's sense of self (in both dignifying and degrading ways, depending on the relationship) and being shaped by the context within which the relationship exists. Anders writes about the relationships she has with her characters, the relationships she writes between her characters, and her relationships with the characters of other writers. One of the most interesting relationships that she writes about is

the relationship with readers. She describes the inner imaginary reader and the value of writing to someone particular.

Especially if you're from a marginalized community, thinking of yourself as writing a story to, and for, other members of your community can keep you from worrying nonstop about what so-called "mainstream" readers will think. (2021, p. 64)

A strong theme of the book is noticing, naming and deconstructing dominant discourses. Anders writes, "we need fiction that interrogates the layers of privilege and dehumanization that make some people seem to others like fair game for abuse" (p. 75).

Anders also spends a lot of time questioning normality and escaping from failure (see Denborough, 2014, pp. 171–174). She writes, "I strongly encourage you to find the definition of success that makes you happy, rather than encouraging you to be miserable" (p. 27).

She brings in the idea of writing as a way to make a contribution to community, and the collective nature of this – the way writing (and sharing our imaginations in whatever form that takes) is a collective creative act.

When the world is on fire and the people you love are at risk, what should you write about? Whatever you feel able to write. Whatever will make you feel like you can keep living and fighting. Write that thing that you're ready and excited to write – not the thing that you feel the moment calls for, or the story that you think will fix every broken thing in the world. (2021, p. 73)

This is good advice for fiction writers, of course. But it is also good advice for collective narrative practitioners, or any of us who are trying to figure out what to do in response to the world on fire.

The past is always alive in the present, and the stories we tell about it matter. (Anders, 2021, p. 142)

In one of the first writing exercises in the book, Anders reminds readers that "a good character usually has as much story behind them as ahead of them. We might only need to glimpse their past, but we should know that they've already been on the journey before the story even begins" (p. 18). What a precious reminder for people going through a hard time: that we have useful and interesting histories to draw on, that we have skills and values and dreams, and that we have already been on a journey. What an important note for therapists and practitioners who might be hearing a story of struggle, particularly at a time of increasing hostility and threat. The people we are speaking with have already been on a journey, even if this particular moment is new and terrible.

I found myself shifting the way that I think about other people's behaviour towards me, based on the idea that people react based on their experiences and their past. I feel like that's allowed a little bit more space in the world for me, in experiencing other people's actions as something other than directed at me or a product of our interaction in the moment. Allowing the people in my life to also exist as characters that have rich backstories that inform the way they show up. – Aakhil

I keep thinking back to that first exercise we did, to fictionalise a scenario from your own life. I think KJ was the one who was like, "I wrote it from the perspective of one of my [tabletop roleplaying game] characters", and I was like, oh, that's a good way to fictionalise. I keep coming back to that, thinking about my own life and thinking about what I might want to write. You know, how am I going to process this experience through a character's reaction to it. – April

We noticed how a lot of the character exercises that Anders offers have parallels in narrative practices of externalising and getting some distance from a problem in order to find a different perspective and different possible actions.

I [appreciated] the exercise we did, changing the narrative voice and re-writing the same small scene. And it was so powerful how much that really shifted what things were brought to my attention in the scene in my mind. It reminded me about the ways that shifting the narrator might also help us shift our interpretations or stories about the things that are going on in our lives. Really bringing thought to the idea that the details that we pay attention to ultimately inform the [way we understand the experience].
–Aakhil

Our conversations were structured so that we discussed the book for the first half of our time together, and then we wrote for the rest of our time, with the opportunity to share either our just-written work or to talk about the writing process before we ended for the week.

The practice of writing together during our video calls was significant for us.

I loved the longer format where we had space to talk about things and then write together, in the same allotted time/space. So often, there is discussion without building in a practice portion. –Evren

We learnt together what was useful and what was less useful, which of the prompts from the book would work well in a co-writing session and which might be too broad or too complex.

Lots of us want to be writing more than we are, lots of us have doubts about our writing abilities, or we have held dreams of being a “real writer” for a long time. The book, and our practice of writing together, gave us each permission to try out different ideas without committing to anything grand. To “go on lots of first dates with story ideas” (2021, p. 46).

The conversation we had in week two around not being so precious about our own writing is something that I still think about. –LJ

I appreciate the body doubling element of it and the scheduling, the specific time period in the calendar. I would not have done the

writing exercises [on my own] but realised the great benefit of having the community be around for that time that we were writing together. It made the process feel more approachable, and much less scary. And then the availability of that debrief space afterwards to sort of reset the barometer when there can be a lot of self-judgement about oh, this isn't good, or I didn't do what I was supposed to do, or any of those things, to relate to others in the group who are similarly experiencing things that I was or have. –Aakhil

The book gave us permission, over and over again, to just make up stories, even if they never become books, even if they never get shared. Anders kept bringing us back to the value of storytelling and how it can help us get through hard times.

Anders writes, “We are shaped by our communities, for good and bad, and our communities define the worlds we belong to. Community is going to save us in real life – and in fiction, stories about communities joining together are going to be a lifeline” (2021, p. 8).

This is such an example of what reading and writing to get through hard times can feel like, can look like, and also maybe some sort of proof of concept that we are indeed living through these unprecedented hard times and that this was incredibly soul filling, nourishing as a process. It allowed me to engage with ideas that might have felt too enormous or difficult to approach on my own, as an individual doing the reading and the writing. To have that companionship through the journey, the sounding board and the safety of the container in which we wrote and read together was significant. –Aakhil

It was really cool to hear about other people's experiences and readings and what it made possible. It opened up other avenues that I would not have considered only by myself. I also did writing with you all. I did not do any writing when I read it first [on my own]. The fact that I did any writing was a huge win for me. –Evren

I have never thought of narrative practice as something that is held in expert hands by narrative therapists. You would not need to be a therapist to use this book in therapeutic ways, to be using these exercises to deconstruct discourses or to retell your stories. You could use this book to help you write fantastical stories that get you through it, or you could use it like some of us in this group have to just think about how we are thinking about our own lives and narrating our own lives to ourselves. – Tiffany

Part-way through reading NSYCS together, some of us agreed that we would like to continue on to read *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*, inspired by one of Anders' newsletter references to that book.

If my writing advice book *Never Say You Can't Survive* is the theory, then my novel *Lessons in Magic and Disaster* is the practice ... I was writing first drafts of both books at the same time, during the very worst days of the pandemic. And I was very much thinking about the power of story, and how telling a story is in many ways like casting a spell: for protection, for strength, for family. I also was following my own advice, using *Lessons in Magic and Disaster* as a way to escape from the terrible things that were happening around me – but also using it to process some stuff that was going on. Everything I said in *Never Say You Can't Survive* about harnessing your emotions, including rage and the desire for human connection, went directly into the process of writing *Lessons in Magic and Disaster*. The section of NSCYC that talks about how powerful it can be to write about people wanting something is basically me drawing a roadmap for *Lessons*. (Anders, 2025b)

Lessons in Magic and Disaster

Have I truly read a book, if you are not here to discuss it with me? (Anders, 2025a, p. 94)

We were a smaller group for reading *Lessons in Magic and Disaster* (LIMAD), and we decided to

read LIMAD three chapters at a time, rather than all at once and discussing the book as a whole. This was a significant shift in the way that most of us engage with fiction, and we found it useful.

The most notable part about reading it together the way we did was the combination of pacing and focus. I don't normally read at that speed. I'm normally dashing through a book, and to be taking my time with just a few chapters each week and focusing on looking at, "Okay, how does this relate to what we've been talking about last week? How does this relate to what other people have been saying?" was helpful in seeing more of the detail and nuance in the writing. – April

I also appreciated the difference in pacing from what my normal consumption of fiction looks like. It offered the opportunity to savour the build up at parts and really experience the timing or cadence of the book. I appreciated the shared speculations. And also, I found that the details that I latched on to and remembered were often different but similar to those that others did. It offered more of a complete picture than I feel I would have derived from reading it on my own. – Aakhil

I found that the way that I was thinking about the chapters changed during our conversations. The close reading, which was not just close reading on my own, but bouncing off of what each of you was bringing to the conversations, changed my experience of those chapters. One of you would say something that stood out to you, and it would bounce off what I had been thinking about something in a different way. I think even if I slowed down and read a book at that pace on my own, it wouldn't be that same experience. – Tiffany

At the heart of the story is Jamie, a trans woman, PhD student and witch (three identities that are all important to the story), and her mother Serena. Serena and Jamie are both still grieving the loss of Serena's partner, Mae.

One of the things we most appreciated about LIMAD is how richly layered and complex it is as a narrative. Through the lens of NSYCS, and knowing some of the values and intentions that Anders may have held as she wrote the book, we were able to see the ideas put into practice. We could especially see the focus on relationships, and the care for nuanced and thoughtful engagement with politics and power. This gave us rich material for our conversations, particularly when it comes to thinking through how we think about harm and community responses to harm.

The book moves between three time periods, and is told in a variety of genre styles, from the contemporary urban fantasy of the “present” chapters, to the literary fiction of the near-past chapters, and the wide range of styles in the distant-past chapters, which include fairytales and letters and snippets from books. Many of the quotes used are from actual historical documents, except for the letters and the book that Jamie is studying.

The three time periods are woven together and the relationships that are important in each have resonances and parallels with the relationships in the other time periods. Throughout the book there are queer characters facing hardship and experiencing joy and love. They grapple with systemic issues and interpersonal issues, and they try out a range of responses. These are richly human characters, with quirks and flaws and hopes and skills. They are treated with incredible dignity, and it was heartening to read. In each time period, the social context is different, even though there are echoes and throughlines. By including all these different time periods and grappling with identity and relationships in each, Anders makes space for a conversation about how identities are co-constructed in the specific context of the time and culture.

Serena and Mae used to say they’d joined together using words that nobody would understand anymore. Serena had been a “soft butch,” Mae a “stone femme,” and the two of them had formed a “domestic partnership.” These things had mattered,

not just as labels but as statements of intent and fealty. (Anders, 2025a, p. 71)

There’s a significant focus in the novel on the effects of people’s actions, and how we might respond to harm. The book invites us to consider what it means to show care in community contexts, how to respond to the harms that are inflicted by unjust systems and the people being influenced by hostile discourses, and also the harms that happen within relationships of care and love. We were invited to think about what our roles might be in responding to harm and showing up for each other. These are important topics to think about at a time like this, when so many communities are facing escalating threats and when it matters more than ever to have skills for navigating conflict and complexity.

I have also found myself thinking about how acting or being in opposition to harm might appear materially differently than being supportive of those affected by harm and the way in which those can lead to very different outcomes, though we can sometimes conflate them. –Aakhil

I do think there is potentially significant therapeutic value in reading fiction together and talking through where does this take you and what does it mean? What does it have you thinking about? Some of our conversations about the book helped me understand what I care about in different ways. Particularly the conversation about how characters who cause harm, either intentionally or unintentionally, are responded to in community. Those conversations were really useful for me. They were fun but also generative. –Tiffany

Although external and malicious harms are a significant part of the book, it’s the interpersonal relationship ruptures that are most interesting.

One of the lines that Anders returns to a few times through the book is something Serena said to Jamie when Jamie was young: “You cannot mess up so badly that you will not be loved”

(pp. 12, 113, 294, 344). Near the end of the book, Jamie says to Serena, “Mom. You will always be loved, no matter what. You will always be loved. You cannot mess up so badly that you will not be loved” (p. 520).

Throughout the book, this doesn’t mean an absence of consequences for hurtful or harmful actions, and it doesn’t mean an easy dodge of accountability. It means that there is relationship possible on the other side of harm, and that’s something worth carrying forward in hard times.

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Notes

- ¹ Some examples include legislating us out of public spaces such as bathrooms (in an example from the United States, as of September 2025, 20 American states ban trans people from using public bathrooms aligned with their gender – see Movement Advancement Project, 2026); reducing access to transition-related medical care (in an example from Canada, as of December 2025, Alberta has prohibited doctors from providing gender affirming care to trans youth – see Alberta Medical Association, 2025); banning trans people from sports (in another example from Canada, as of September 2025, trans women and girls are banned from competing in school, university and sporting clubs, and in an example from the United States, as of April 2026, USA Hockey will have banned all trans people from participating in hockey programs – see Kennedy, 2026).
- ² We thought that it would be pretty interesting to map the book’s ideas alongside the (draft) Charter of Storytelling Rights (Dulwich Centre, n.d.). We didn’t manage to get that done for this review, and we would love to hear from you if you do take up this idea!