ReadingGroupGuides
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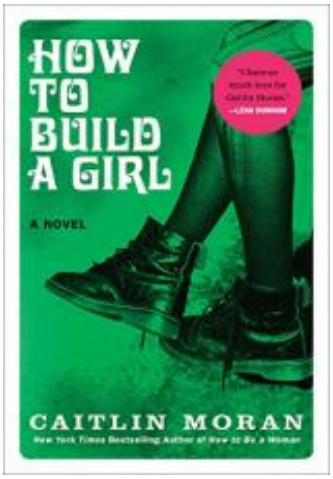
# How to Build a Girl

by Caitlin Moran




## About the Book

What do you do in your teenage years when you realize what your parents taught you wasn?t enough? You must go out and find books and poetry and pop songs and bad heroes --- and build *yourself*.

It?s 1990. Johanna Morrigan, 14, has shamed herself so badly on local TV that she decides that there?s no point in being Johanna anymore and reinvents herself as Dolly Wilde --- fast-talking, hard-drinking Gothic hero and full-time Lady Sex Adventurer. She will save her poverty-stricken Bohemian family by becoming a writer --- like Jo in LITTLE WOMEN, or the Brontes --- but without the dying-young bit.

By 16, she?s smoking cigarettes, getting drunk and working for a music paper. She?s writing pornographic letters to rock stars, having *all* the kinds of sex with *all* the kinds of men, and eviscerating bands in reviews of 600 words or less.

But what happens when Johanna realizes she?s built Dolly with a fatal flaw? Is a box full of records, a wall full of posters and a head full of paperbacks enough to build a girl after all?

Imagine THE BELL JAR --- written by Rizzo from *Grease.* HOW TO BUILD A GIRL is a funny, poignant and heartbreakingly evocative story of self-discovery and invention, as only Caitlin Moran could tell it.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Johanna?s father occupies a large role in the novel?s first chapter. How would you describe the dynamic between father and daughter?

**2.** How does humor affect the scandalous or painful moments in the novel?

**3.** How is Johanna?s eventual music writing influenced by her having to imagine songs she reads about long before she can actually listen to them?

**4.** Consider the many movie and book references Johanna makes throughout the novel. What do they add to your understanding of her? Which seem most surprising?

**5.** How has poverty affected Johanna?

**6.** At one point Johanna claims she has become just like her father. In what ways are they similar?

**7.** What?s the value of a nom de plume like Dolly Wilde for Johanna? In what ways is such an alternate identity problematic for her? For anyone?

**8.** What qualities make Krissi a good older brother, someone Johanna loves and needs?

**9.** In what ways is writing important to and valuable for Johanna?

**10.** Johanna feels her heart break when she sees herself on the monitors at the television studio. Why is this? Why is her visual awareness of herself so unsettling?

**11.** What is so compelling for Johanna about the particular music of this time?

**12.** Johanna is able to make a place for herself in the male-dominated world of rock music. How is she able to do this? At what cost? In what ways is she still limited by her gender?

**13.** Often Johanna works to pretend to be someone else. In what ways is this valuable or harmful?

**14.** A sharp distinction is made between being a fan or critic of music. Why might these be mutually exclusive?

**15.** Johanna insightfully discovers that she is valued for being sexually experienced but harshly judged for having too much sexual experience. What are the possible responses to this insight?

**16.** Johanna resorts to what she calls a ?physical disconnect? during unpleasant sexual experiences in part because she doesn?t yet hear her own voice. How might discovering her voice alter her experience?

**17.** In a moment talking with Rob about music, Johanna suggests that modern technological access to music via the Internet --- where ?all the facts are kept? --- has done away with the interpersonal talking and piecemeal sharing of music knowledge. Do you agree with this assessment?

**18.** John Kite is a vibrant and centrally important part of Johanna?s experience with music. What does he provide for her? How does he fulfill or contradict the image of a rock star?

**19.** Thinking about how parents sometimes limit the scope of what their children might know or become, Johanna distinguishes between *being* and *doing*. What?s the relationship between identity and behavior? Are we what we think or what we do?

## Author Bio

Caitlin Moran was named Columnist of the Year by the British Press Awards in 2010 and Critic and Interviewer of the Year in 2011 for her work in the *Times* of London. Her debut book, HOW TO BE A WOMAN, won the 2011 Galaxy Book of the Year Award and was an instant *New York Times* bestseller. HOW TO BUILD A GIRL is her first novel since the one she wrote at 14, which doesn?t count. You can follow Caitlin on Twitter @caitlinmoran.

## Critical Praise

?HOW TO BUILD A GIRL is dirtier and funnier than *Almost Famous* --- it?s a sexual coming-of-age story as much as anything else --- and one that, crucially, has a hard, glowing kernel of class awareness?If you don?t know who Caitlin Moran is, it may be time to find out?I wish someone had given me this rowdy and fearless little book when I was 16?her comic novel is sloppy, big-hearted and alive in all the right ways. We?re made to feel that for Johanna and for ourselves, to pluck another line from *Almost Famous*, ?it?s all happening.??

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**How to Build a Girl**

by Caitlin Moran

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