

Book Club Questions for *Learned by Heart* by Emma Donoghue

1. Much of *Learned by Heart* draws upon the five-million-word journals by Anne Lister, who was a real historical figure often considered one of the *'first modern lesbians.'* What can a journal teach us as a historical document? Do you keep a journal, and if so, how do you think your words would be read in 200 years? Why is it important to write one's story, even without the intent of sharing it with others?"
2. Eliza gets her pen taken away from her at the end of each letter. How may this be representative of a larger question, about who gets to write and why? Why tell this story from Eliza's perspective, instead of Anne's?
3. Discuss the title of the novel. What does it mean to *'learn by heart'*? Is it to memorize something, as the girls do at their school, or, as Eliza says on page 223, is it to discover something that it feels like you've invented? On page 131, Lister says *'...if the mind's constantly trained to remember rather than to reason, won't the faculty of memory become overdeveloped and the mind be left lopsided?'* Are memories a reliable source of knowledge about ourselves? What has Eliza learned by the end of the novel? Did you have to learn anything as a child that you have memorized *'by heart'*?
4. Is this story a tragedy or a triumph? Does Raine make the right choice in letting Lister go?
5. This is a story about first love, but also about friendship. On page 262, Mercy walks in on Raine and Lister engaged in their love affair. Why don't you think she shares what she has seen? Do you think the other girls suspect the nature of Raine and Lister's relationship? How might the social dynamics between the girls mirror the society they live in?
6. Why does this story still resonate in the current moment? Why is it important to tell the stories of those who may not have been able to tell their own?
7. Mercy, one of the other girls at the school, inadvertently discovers Eliza and Anne's secret. Why do you think she keeps their secret? How do the other girls' perceptions of Eliza and Anne's relationship reflect the societal norms of the time?
8. The story is set in an early 19th-century girls' boarding school in York, England. How does the setting influence the lives of the characters, especially Eliza and Anne? What role does the school play in shaping their identities?
9. The book alternates between the past, when Eliza and Anne were at the boarding school, and the future, with Eliza in a psychiatric hospital. How do these two timelines complement each other in understanding the characters and their journeys? What impact does the asylum have on Eliza's mental state and her recollection of the past?

10. Eliza and Anne's relationship evolves from friendship to a deep and passionate love. How do societal norms and expectations of the time affect their ability to openly express their feelings for each other? How do they navigate the challenges of their forbidden love?
11. The book delves into themes of identity, race, and class. How do Eliza's biracial heritage and Anne's non-conformity challenge the social norms of the era? How do they each grapple with their unique identities?
12. Anne Lister's diaries play a significant role in the narrative. How does the use of Anne's journals enhance the storytelling? What can journals and personal writings reveal about historical figures and their inner lives?
13. Discuss the character of Anne Lister. What makes her a compelling and unconventional figure for her time? How does she influence Eliza's growth and self-discovery?
14. The author's note at the end of the book provides historical context and insights into the real-life inspirations for the story. How does this additional information enhance your appreciation of the novel? Were there any historical details or facts that surprised you or deepened your understanding of the characters and their era?