

BETWEEN THESE WALLS

By John Herrick

READING GROUP GUIDE

Discussion Questions

1. To which character did you most relate? Why?
2. Hunter experiences growth during the novel. When does his growth begin: before or after his relationship with Gabe begins? Does growth occur after his secret is exposed to the public? Does Gabe experience growth as well?
3. Hunter has kept his sexual attractions a secret for 14 years. Was there a time in your life when you found it easier to build walls around yourself than to face the truth?
4. Much of the story occurs against the backdrop of a cold Ohio winter and the construction of a new home. How does the author use seasons or events to reflect the internal processes of Hunter and Ellen?
5. Jesse Barlow, a supporting character, also appeared in John Herrick's novel *From The Dead*. How has Jesse grown since then? How might Jesse's battle have changed his outlook or prepared him to support Hunter?
6. Can you identify parallels between Ellen Krieger's silent struggle and that of Hunter?
7. Which chapter do you consider your favorite? Why? Which chapters do you believe reveal the most about Hunter, Gabe and Ellen, respectively?
8. How would you define Hunter's relationship with Kara versus his relationship with Gabe? How does each relationship affect Hunter's personal growth?
9. In the Prologue, we are introduced to a young Hunter Carlisle. Do you think the Prologue's events helped shape who Hunter is today? If so, in what ways?
10. Hunter has solid faith, yet he harbored a secret. Do you consider his actions hypocritical?
11. In Chapter 22, Hunter recalls a classmate, Christopher Patton, and regrets he allowed Christopher to face humiliation alone. Are there events in your life you wish you had handled differently?

12. In Chapter 35, Hunter confides in his pastor. Do you feel his pastor handled the scenario in an appropriate manner? If you were in Hunter's shoes, what would have helped you during that discussion?
13. In Chapter 36, Hunter reveals his secret to his parents. How do you feel his parents reacted to the news? How might sudden, similar news from your child affect you?
14. How has Hunter's relationship with his father impacted Hunter's growth processes during childhood and adulthood?
15. In Chapters 4, 9, 10, 22, 24, 29 and 43, Hunter recalls events from his past. How did those events help shape who he is today?
16. How do religion, emotion and sex drive Hunter? How do these factors seem to drive other characters, or do they?

A Conversation with the Author

How did you arrive at the idea for this novel?

Early in 2011, a character arose within me: a middle-school kid who was a Christian and harbored an attraction to the same gender. I pondered facets of this character's circumstances. His fears, his feelings of guilt, the hits to his self-esteem—everything about his silent struggle grabbed my heart. At that point, I wouldn't have had the courage to write a book about him. One year later, a news story caught my attention. It revolved around the plight of a high school student on the verge of suicide. This student, about fifteen years old, had endured a continual onslaught of bullying for one reason: He was gay. Although I know nothing about that student, my heart broke for him. My immediate gut response was, *Never again. Not on my watch. Not if I can help it.* After hearing his story, I decided to chuck my fear and develop *Between These Walls*, featuring a main character whose struggle in adulthood has roots in his childhood. That said, though the news story served as a catalyst for action, my novel is neither based on it nor related to it.

Between These Walls chronicles Hunter Carlisle's journey, step by step, as he processes his feelings in light of his faith. While external events come into play, the crux of the novel's action occurs within Hunter's heart and mind. It's a character study more than a plot-driven story.

How did you go about designing Hunter and Gabe?

A popular stereotype exists for gay men in terms of demeanor, mannerisms and interests. While the stereotype is accurate in some cases, it is inaccurate in many others. A key question I asked myself was, *Should I follow the lines of that stereotype, or present Hunter as the opposite?* I figured individuals of both types needed their story told, so I decided to capture both ends of the spectrum. I constructed an everyday guy with classic male attributes and

interests. In other words, the guy you'd least suspect to be gay. Next, I designed the character Gabe Hellman to align more with the stereotype many people have adopted.

I don't have quantitative data to back up my hunch, but I've long believed more people deal with same-sex attraction than we assume. I believe many hide it well or have a simultaneous attraction to the opposite gender, which enables them to live a "typical" life without raising suspicions. Therefore, I constructed Hunter as, technically, bisexual—but with a stronger, irrepressible draw toward males. This characteristic would allow him to remain in hiding for years yet prevent him from escaping his predicament.

To enhance the story further, I selected character names to reflect who the characters are and how they impact Hunter. I chose the name *Hunter* to call to mind a hunter-gatherer image, the classic male stereotype—and the last place we might expect to find a gay male. His name symbolizes his attributes and interests, yet belies his deepest secret. *Carlisle* is a common surname, which I selected at random. It reflects how others view him: an average, ordinary guy beyond suspicion.

For Gabe, I envisioned a character with Scandinavian features, which was simply an author preference. When I perused Scandinavian surnames, however, one proved perfect: *Hellman*. Hunter is a Christian who fears his homosexual feelings could lead him to hell. In that respect, Gabe represents temptation. So Gabe's last name, Hellman, calls those fears to mind. But Gabe is also a Christian and a good-hearted individual, so his first name reflects that characteristic: *Gabe*, which is short for *Gabriel*, the name of an angel mentioned in the Bible. Thus, the full name *Gabriel Hellman* illustrates the crux of Hunter and Gabe's story: a tug-of-war between faith and feelings.

Why did you incorporate a faith element into *Between These Walls*?

When I began writing novels, I had no interest in writing faith-related fiction. I felt it meant a load of rules and red tape for what I *couldn't* write or explore. But a difference exists between the Christian fiction genre and weaving faith into a mainstream novel, as John Grisham demonstrated in *The Testament*. When I constructed *From The Dead*, a prior novel, I had intended to write a mainstream novel with no faith element whatsoever. Its main character, Jesse Barlow—who reemerges in *Between These Walls*—was a preacher's son filled with regret. As I considered that novel's chain of events and who Jesse was, I realized I couldn't give an accurate depiction of him without delving into his faith background. Once I discovered I could weave a faith element into a mainstream novel in a realistic manner, I fell in love with it. I wanted to accomplish it again: to chronicle a character's struggle in a way readers wouldn't find among the Christian fiction genre. And as a mainstream novel, I don't need to censor my characters. They are free to behave and speak the way they truly would, as if we overheard them in a restaurant. The one requirement I place upon myself is that my novels are genuine and plausible—which can't happen if I whitewash the characters or their language.

Did you find any aspects of this novel a particular challenge?

If Hunter feels vulnerable in a chapter, or if the reader feels vulnerable reading a chapter, then it's safe to say I felt vulnerable writing that chapter.

I had never experienced a homosexual relationship as I constructed the novel, so the project stretched my comfort zone and is different from anything I've ever written. It challenged me to view things in a manner I'd never viewed them, and to envision myself in circumstances I had never experienced. To portray Hunter in an honest way, I needed to drop my guard and write about sensitive scenarios unique to males that I wouldn't discuss in everyday conversation. To my surprise, the interaction between Hunter and Gabe proved easy. I handled their dialogue and displays of affection the way I had between male and female characters in my past projects.

Several chapters invade Hunter's privacy, where Hunter is alone or we explore his sensitive thoughts to which we wouldn't otherwise have access. Those chapters proved challenging for me due to the vulnerability of allowing readers into the most sensitive realms of the male psyche. You can find examples of this in Chapters 9, 10 and 16. Hunter would never talk about what went through his mind in those chapters, but I needed to delve into them to tell his story.

Years ago, I watched actress Ellen Barkin in an interview. Her recent film had involved a nude scene, which the interviewer mentioned. Barkin explained her willingness to participate in that scene: She simply didn't want to lose her fear of being nude on camera. That hit home with me. As an author, I never want to be afraid to write or to make myself vulnerable in my novels. Sometimes, in order to tell an honest story or bond with my readers, it means risking what other people will think of me. In other words, I can't be afraid to "do a nude scene" in terms of how I write.

How did you arrive at the title, *Between These Walls*?

Between These Walls came to mind as a potential song title when I was a high school student. I never wrote the song, but I loved the title. It spoke of secrets hidden between the walls of one's home and heart. With the song unwritten, I kept my eye out for the perfect project. Twenty years later, as I pondered this novel, *Between These Walls* struck me as an ideal fit. I tend to select my titles early, because they encapsulate the story in a few words and serve as my North Star during story development. Eventually, the title also led to the concept of new home construction as a symbol of Hunter and Ellen's inner turmoil.

What motivates you to select one project over another?

In general, three elements tug me toward a writing project, including a novel like *Between These Walls*:

1. The story emerges internally rather than externally.
2. Commercial and target-audience appeal.

3. A potential to inspire or encourage the reader — my favorite element.

The third element is fascinating because, when you think about it, the same collection of words can trigger a vastly different response in each reader. It can serve as entertainment for one person. It might inspire another to reach for his or her dreams. And that same novel could provide encouragement to a person enduring pain or contemplating suicide. Impact potential is a privilege, and it's like fuel during the writing process.

How do you perceive the connection between reader and author?

I believe the written word forges a bond between reader and author. When readers choose to buy a book, they've chosen to invest their valuable time in the story. If they decide to continue reading past the early chapters, a bond forms. At this point, I believe *the author* determines the depth of the bond: In other words, the more I invest myself emotionally in the novel—the more vulnerable I allow myself to become as an author—the deeper the reader will connect with what they read. If readers feel you've been honest with them and they're satisfied with what they read, a degree of trust results. And hopefully, by the end of the book, readers trust the author enough to invest part of their lives reading that author's next novel.