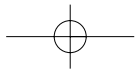
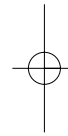
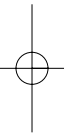
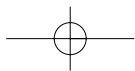
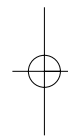
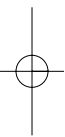


Hello, Cruel World





Hello, Cruel World

101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens,
Freaks, and Other Outlaws

KATE BORNSTEIN

foreword by Sara Keirsten Quin

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For my daughter, Jessica, and her children.

Just in case any of you need this one day.

For my mom, Mildred Vandam Bornstein, who
passed out of this world eleven years ago.

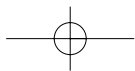
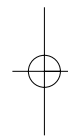
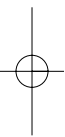
Mom, you should now be approaching the age that
you might want to read and use this book.

For all outsiders, freaks, misfits, nerds, geeks,
queers, and outlaws.

Please stay alive. We need you in this world
to keep things interesting.

In loving memory of Jake Barker (1980–2002).

Honey, I'm so sorry I didn't get this to you in time.
Wherever you are these days, I hope you and life are
on much better terms.



Acknowledgments

The longer you manage to live, the more people there are who have contributed to the quality of your life. In order to make more space for the actual book, I've had to limit these acknowledgments to those people who've most directly influenced this book.

To Barbara Carrellas, my partner in life, love, and art. I couldn't have done it without you, hon. Your spot-on edits kept me focused, and even more importantly, you made a pug lover out of me.

Thanks go to friends, family, extended family, and early readers: Caitlin Sullivan, Kaylynn Raschke, John Emigh, David Harrison, Ava Apple, Jack Barker, Ann Pancake, Alan Bornstein, Roz Kaveney, Mary Dorman, Amy Scholder, Veronica Vera, Tony Phillips, Marsha Botzer, T. Cooper, Aidan Key, Holly Hughes, Esther Newton, Gail and Betsey Leondar-Wright, Troy Dwyer, Gail Harris, Gayle Landers, and Marsian De Lellis.

You're able to read this book thanks to the courage, persis-

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tence, and dedication of my editor at Seven Stories Press, Crystal Yakacki; my publisher, Dan Simon; and my literary agent, Malaga Baldi. Thank you all for believing in this project. Thanks, too, to my trusty ward and sidekick, Erin Markey, for keeping me organized. Thank you to Jon Gilbert and Phoebe Hwang for translating my rough layout sketches into something truly beautiful and functional.

I wrote a lot of this book in the woods of eastern Long Island in the sweet home of Lynn Birks and Judith Wit. I wrote the bulk of the 101 Alternatives in two Hell's Kitchen Starbucks, where the baristas made me feel right at home and where T-Mobile kept me connected to the Web. I wrote on a succession of Apple PowerBooks, using OS X. I used OmniOutliner Pro for my notes and outlines, and Microsoft Word for the actual writing as well as for the rough layout and early design of the book. I'm grateful to Scott Kelby for his workshops, tips, and how-to books that taught me how to do diddle all the images in this book in Adobe Photoshop. I'm also grateful to Dover Publications for their permission to use their images. And to Ron and Joe of Art Parts for their generous permission to use over twenty of their images. Thank you also to Snaggy and Nitrozac of geekculture.com for the lovely geek toon, to Jill Thompson for her image of Death, and to Diane DiMassa for the use of her Hothead Paisan art.

There were times during the writing of this book when I found myself deep in despair. That's when I watched all seven seasons of *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* (twice), and all the episodes of *Firefly* (three times, once with the commentaries turned on). So, thanks to Joss Whedon and to the casts and crews of those TV shows. I also re-read the ten volumes of my favorite graphic novel: *The*

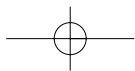
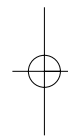
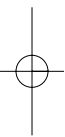
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Sandman, by Neil Gaiman. And I kept my spirits up with the awesome Jamaican cooking of renowned neighborhood chef, Colin Drysdale.

I'm deeply grateful to Julia Ritchie, my life coach and therapist, for the insights she has given me. Thank you, Dr. Rona Vail at the Callen-Lorde Clinic in New York for my good health, and thank you Judy Reilly for untangling my financial records so I could go on writing. Thank you, dear Edward Maloney for a decade of really great hair. And thank you Dona Ann McAdams for making me look so good in all the photos you've taken of me over the past twenty years, especially my author photo for this book.

Thanks to Craig Dean, Ellie Deegan, Katya Min, and Felicia Gustin, who book my speaking and performance gigs. I've received encouragement and support from literally thousands of students, faculty, staff, and administrators in over one hundred colleges, universities, conferences, and high schools where I've had the honor and great pleasure to speak and perform.

Gone from this world are sweet Goose, the pug, as is my beloved cranky old Gwydyn, whose ashes now rest on the lush floor of the Ngorongoro Crater where he can chase zebras to his heart's delight. It's taken two pugs, two cats, two turtles, and a well-populated ant farm to make up the loss of you, pal.



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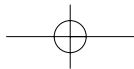
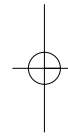
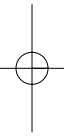
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Foreword

My grandmother was rumored to have told my mother that, if she let us continue to pick out our own clothes (brown snowsuits) and cut our own hair (mulletts) and pierce our ears (only the right ear), my sister Tegan and I would turn into “lesbians.” She was right, sort of.

I don’t think it was my mother’s support of our color-blind preferences in outerwear or the androgynous haircuts in elementary school that turned us into lesbians. But her patient, supportive parenting did leave me feeling fairly confident upon my arrival at the threshold of adolescence. Having outgrown our childhood nicknames for one another (“Brother”), Tegan and I transitioned somewhat successfully into junior high and a world of shoplifting, hand jobs, and drive-bys.

Still, junior high was hell on earth for me. Instead of fighting my way to the top echelons of popularity, I was happy playing make-believe games like “Jail” and “Orphanage” in the basement

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with my best friend. I was totally unprepared to face the emotional cannibalism of my bullies. At the insecure and irrational age of fourteen, turning to the administration of my school for any sort of help or support would have seemed a ridiculous and potentially dangerous effort. Forced to take refuge in many bathroom stalls, I planned my sick days months in advance.

It was at this point in my life that I realized almost everyone I knew was suffering. Terrible stories of sexual abuse, assault, and neglect by parents, teachers, and the system were so common I lost track of what had happened to whom. No adult or authority figure was prepared to take responsibility for the kids who challenged the system in any way. In the low-income neighborhoods where I grew up, out of control teen gangs were allowed and almost encouraged to run wild. Rather than looking at the symptoms and addressing the problems, the administration expelled these struggles right out into the street. It seemed like no one was even paying attention. I had friends who successfully made it to the tenth grade without ever learning how to read!

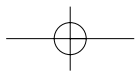
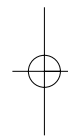
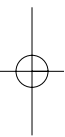
I know that the struggles I had in my teen years pale in comparison to some. Most of my friends made it out with scratches and bruises. But since then I have seen too many of those survivors fast-track it to jail, poverty, and drug addiction. What didn't get them in high school seemed to catch up to them later on in life. A narrow escape does not atone for a missing foundation of positive self-esteem and coping skills. What Kate Bornstein calls "Bully Culture" extends far beyond the halls of junior high: the struggle of youth as a social outlaw is the struggle of a lifetime.

What I deeply respect about *Hello, Cruel World* is that by stand-

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ing shoulder to shoulder with marginalized and oppressed teens, Kate looks straight into the eyes of the bullies who seem to outnumber us and shows us how to successfully take a stand against them. Instead of a text heavy on statistics and psychological jargon, Kate bravely uses humor to collapse the wall of isolation and shame that is often associated with suicide (and with being a teenager). I take strength from this confident, honest book and from Kate's success as a compassionate human being who has courageously spoken out for all of us living outside of the box. We are being offered alternatives and insight from an ally who has been there and survived. This "verbal eye contact" is revolutionary and can be life-changing. Meet Kate's kind, steady gaze in this book: it is a sure-fire alternative to suicide, and I hope anyone in trouble will give it a try.

—Sara Quin
of Tegan and Sara
March 2006



Introduction

Hi, I'm Kate Bornstein.

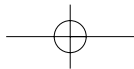
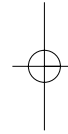
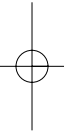
I'm nearly sixty years old, and a lot of people think I'm a freak for a lot of reasons. I wrote this book to help you stay alive because I think the world needs more kind people in it, no matter who or what they are, or do. The world is healthier because of its outsiders and outlaws and freaks and queers and sinners. I fall neatly into all of those categories, so it's no big deal to me if you do or don't.

This is not a book of reasons not to kill yourself. No matter how many I could come up with, you'll come up with more reasons to go through with it. This is a book about things to do *instead*.



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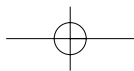
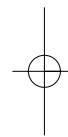
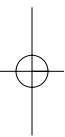
I've had a lot of reasons to kill myself, and a lot of time to do it in, and I have stayed alive by doing a lot of things that are considered immoral or illegal. I'm glad I did them all because I've really enjoyed writing this book. This may be a scary time for you, and if that's so, I hope that I can help you find your courage again. If we meet some day, let me know what worked.





PART 1





Hello, Cruel Me

Today could be the last day of your life. Whether or not you're thinking of killing yourself, you could die at any moment.

Still here?

Excellent! That's called staying alive.

Considering that these could very well be the last few moments of your life, why are you spending such precious time reading this book?



And just who am I, trying to creep inside your head and talk to you about staying alive? You have every right to know more about me. So, here's me coming out to you: My name is Kate Bornstein, and I'm a transsexual.

Still here?

Excellent! That's called being interested in life's possibilities.

I'm not exactly a transsexual. A transsexual is a man who becomes a woman, or a woman who becomes a man, and I'm not a man, and I'm not a woman. I break too many rules of both those genders to be one or the other. I transgress gender. You could call me transgressively gendered. You could call me transgender. Me, I call myself a traveler.

I'm traveling through all sorts of identities, picking and choosing what works and leaving the rest behind. I shift and change in order to make staying alive more worthwhile. I shift and change in order to keep myself from getting stuck someplace where I'd rather be dead, or might as well be.

Sometimes I'm aware of shifting my identity, and other times I shift identities without even thinking about it, like a chameleon skillfully morphing its colors and markings to accommodate an ever-changing environment. They're not multiple personalities, they're all different ways of expressing me in the world.

Are you exactly the same person today that you were seven years ago? That day could have been the last day of your life,



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but it wasn't. Does it seem to you that you're different than you were then? In point of fact, you are a *completely* different person at this moment than you were even when you began reading this book. On a submolecular level, nothing about your body is in the same place as it was just a few moments ago. And then there's your heightened awareness that you really could be dead at any moment. So, are you the same person? I'm not saying you're not. I'm just asking: do you ever consider what it is that makes you the same person now as you were ten minutes ago, when so much of you is truly different?

Still here? Are you sure? Just kidding. That's called coming to terms with life through a synthesis of postmodern theory and Zen Buddhism.

I was a boy who didn't want to be a boy, and in the either/or, gotta-be-one-thing-or-another modernist world of the 1950s, the only alternative to boy was girl, which I wasn't allowed to be. No one talked about the possibility of being neither. So I worked real hard at being a boy. It was something I was conscious of doing all the time. I watched other boys and did what they did. I did what all the ads and movies and school textbooks told me that boys do.



I watched for what to do right. I needed other people to validate my

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effort to be real. It was important that they saw me as one of them. I don't think I ever pulled it off. Their kind of realness seemed always to be out of reach. These days, I'm trying less and less to be a real *anything* but the real me, whatever that ends up being.

Have you ever pretended to be another kind of person so that someone would like you better, or maybe so they wouldn't hurt you? Have you ever changed the kind of person you were in order to make people believe you were somehow more real? How did you ensure that you were looking and behaving within acceptable social parameters?

Everyone consciously or unconsciously changes who they are in response to their environment or to some relationship that they are negotiating at any given moment. Every life form does that. It's a kind of phenotypic plasticity, an observable biological theory that says more or less that all life forms evolve according to their surroundings. They shift and change what they are so that their identity doesn't wind up causing their death and/or eventual extinction as a species.

Elephants stomping around in the polar regions of our planet evolved into woolly mammoths in response to the bone-deep cold. Their tropical ancestors in Africa and India retained their sun-resistant easier-to-cool nearly hairless gray hides. Life forms evolve not only over thousands of years, but sometimes over the course of just one lifetime. Some life forms can evolve in a little over a few minutes. Humans do that. Our spirits and brains seem to have the kind of genetic RAM and processing speed that it

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