



HALL OF FRAME

Talk of The Town Series · Book Three

A Guide for Book Clubs and Classroom Conversations

This story began not with a place, but with a question: what holds people together over time, and what pulls them apart?

The answer I kept arriving at was this: not a shared address, not even a shared history. What holds people together is the accumulated weight of showing up, and the accumulated cost of not showing up. The Core Four at the center of this novel carry both. They have been shaping each other's lives for years before the novel opens, and they are still doing it on the last page.

Hall of Frame is less interested in what happened than in how each person understood it. The same moment, seen from a different angle, becomes a different story. That is not a defect in human perception. It is the condition.

The questions here are meant to open conversation. Take your time with the ones that resist easy answers.

I. HOW THE NOVEL OPENS

The prologue begins at speed. Rain. A car moving too fast, not recklessly, but with purpose, as if velocity might outrun the pressure tightening around the driver's chest. The novel opens after an accident that has already happened, in a hospital where three people who love the same woman are in the same room without yet knowing what they mean to each other.

The novel ends in that same hospital, quieter. Something has shifted.

1.	The prologue drops you into the aftermath before you know the characters or what led them there. A man with bloodied hands. A man still rain-soaked who could not sit down. A suited man whose face fractured when he saw the person in the chair. What did you understand in those first pages, and what did you have to wait to learn? What does it mean to open a story after the worst moment has already occurred?
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2.	By the time the novel reaches its final hospital scene, the same four people are in the same kind of room again, but the texture of it is completely different. What changed between the prologue and that final gathering? Not just in the plot, but in what those people know about each other?
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II. THE CORE FOUR: WHAT THE GROUP MAKES POSSIBLE

Ben, Fiona, Maya, and Rich are four people whose lives have been quietly shaping each other since long before this novel begins. They are not always good to each other. They are not always honest with each other. But they remain the people each of them calls when the situation is serious enough to require someone who already knows the whole story.

The novel is interested in what that kind of relationship costs, and what it makes possible that nothing else does.

3.	The four of them are pulled back together by Fiona's accident, but the fault lines between them were already there. Ben and Rich had not spoken in five years. Maya had left without resolving things. Fiona had been dissolving quietly inside a marriage to a man too busy to notice. Which of the distances between them felt most repairable to you, and which felt most dangerous?
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4.	Ben and Rich's confrontation ends with both of them confessing to jealousy. Not just grievance. Ben was jealous of Rich's freedom; Rich was jealous of Ben's certainty. They had each been telling themselves a
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	story in which the other person was the problem. How long had those stories been running, and what finally made them stop?
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"It took us too long to have this conversation. Five years, man."

5.	Fiona has been dissolving for months before anyone notices, including Ben. She shows up at a BAFFA luncheon craving anything that is not the chandelier-lit emptiness of City Hall banquets. The words she speaks on behalf of the mayor's office taste empty to her even as she says them. When she eventually speaks publicly in opposition to Ben's decision, it is not impulsive. It has been building. What does it take for someone to stop performing support and start meaning what they say?
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6.	Maya left Atlanta because the coffee tasted burnt and the silence had become the loudest thing in the room. She came back before she had decided what coming back meant. What do you think she was looking for? What did she find instead?
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III. RICH AND THE FRAME

Rich makes his living deciding what to point a camera at. He chooses what to include, what to exclude, where to cut. The novel spends a lot of time watching him do this, and then watching him reckon with the fact that he has been applying the same editorial discipline to his own life.

He understands framing. He is less skilled at living inside a frame rather than building one.

7.	Rich returns to Oakland for his mother's health and ends up embedded in a documentary about Paul Ellsworth, the Raiders, and the city's civic memory. He did not plan any of this. How does coming home without an agenda change what he is able to see, compared to the versions of himself who always had a project, always had somewhere else to be?
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8.	The Paul Ellsworth interview is a room where two men who understand performance are watching each other. Paul requests better clothes, calculates his angles, rehearses his lines. Rich sets his notebook on the table and says nothing that could be called warming up. What does Rich understand about Paul that Paul does not understand about Rich? And what does Paul see in Rich that Rich does not want acknowledged?
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9.	The novel's title points directly at Rich's craft. To be in the hall of frame is to be where the camera is pointed. To be outside it is to be invisible. Which characters in the novel are always framing, and which ones are always being framed? Is there anyone who manages to do both at once?
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IV. BEN, POWER, AND THE COST OF THE OFFICE

Ben Cooper has trained himself to hold his expression neutral. He has learned to speak in clean categories: duplication, inefficiencies, temporary pauses, targeted restructuring. He says outcomes three times. He says partnership twice. He never says hunger. He never says mothers.

The novel does not say he is wrong to govern this way. It asks what it costs.

10.	Ben frames the service closures as fiscal necessity. Fiona calls them a moral failure. They are both looking at the same decision. The novel does not adjudicate between them, but it does show us the room where Ben speaks and the silence that follows his applause. What does that silence mean? Who is it protecting?
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11.	Paul Ellsworth, watching from a prison laundry room as Ben's name scrolls across a radio, folds a stack of sheets until the edges are perfect and thinks: deals have a way of coming due. He does not say this to anyone. He does not act on it. He just listens. What is Paul's relationship to Ben's success, and why does the novel keep putting the two of them in proximity even when they never share a scene?
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V. DARLYN THOMAS AND WHAT USEFUL MEANS

Darlyn Thomas is kinetic energy and green eyes that never stop moving. She takes two photographs at a community meeting: Fiona and Jacob, close together, Jacob leaning in. Not incriminating. Not yet. But useful.

She does not know when she will need them. Only that she will.

12.	Darlyn operates entirely within the logic of leverage. She does not fabricate anything. She simply holds what she observes and waits for the moment when it becomes currency. Is what she does wrong? Where is the line between being observant and being predatory, and does the novel think there is one?
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13.	The photograph of Fiona and Jacob becomes a headline: Trouble at home for the Mayor and his wife? Jacob sees it and his stomach knots. Fiona sees it and knows exactly what it will mean. The image is not a lie, but it is not the truth either. What does the novel suggest about the difference between what is captured and what is real? Where else in the story does that gap appear?
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VI. TUESDAY AND THE END OF A STORY

Tuesday returns to Wallace's house the way she always has, without calling ahead, without ceremony, trusting that the door would open when it needed to. She leaves Fiona's hospital room the same way she leaves every room: when the rest no longer belongs to her.

She is the one person in the novel who knows exactly when her part is done.

14.	Tuesday tells Wallace she came back because of loose ends, not because of Ben. What loose ends? The novel does not fully say. She sees what had been broken and what had been rebuilt between Rich and Maya, gives them a single instruction, and leaves. What do you make of a character who appears exactly when needed and disappears when the story no longer belongs to her? What would the novel lose if she explained herself more?
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15.	In the last pages, Rich and Maya stand in the hospital parking lot watching the ambulance pull away. Maya says this feels like an ending. Rich says maybe, or a different kind of beginning. Then he asks: for who? It is one of the few moments in the novel where a character asks a question they already know they cannot answer. What do you think the answer is, for each of them?
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16.	The preview chapter at the end of the novel imagines a future where children are sorted by aptitude at five years old, where compliance is procedural rather than meaningful, where resolution is a signature and a date on a calendar. It is a cold chapter after a warm ending. What is it doing there? What does it ask you to carry forward from everything you just read?
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Thank you for spending time with this story.

The relationships at the center of it are imagined. The dynamics are not. The question of what holds people together over time, and what the answer costs them, is one I am still working out.

Parker Daugherty

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