

TALK OF THE TOWN

A Complete Series Guide · Books One through Four

Brass Secrets · Harbor Code · Hall of Fame · Past and Perfect

SPOILER WARNING: *This guide discusses plot events, character arcs, and endings from all four novels in full. It is intended for readers who have completed the entire series.*

The series began with a basement room in 1986 and a man making a plan for a twenty-four-year-old he could only imagine. It ends in a library that opens four hours a day, where a child has asked how long learning takes and no one has answered.

Between those two moments: four people grow from their mid-twenties into their early forties. A city grows older alongside them. A system sorts and pressures and occasionally breaks, and the people inside it keep showing up anyway.

This guide is for readers who have finished all four novels, or who want to read the series as a whole. The questions here do not belong to any single book. They belong to the accumulation.

The Talk of The Town series asks one question in four different registers: What do we choose to carry forward? And who shows up to carry it?

I. THE TOWN

Oakland is not backdrop in this series. It is a participant. It has a moniker — the Town — and the series earns that word slowly, the way a place earns loyalty: through specificity, through accumulated detail, through the understanding that a city is not an abstraction but a living system made of labor, memory, architecture, and the people who refuse to leave it.

The Chabot Science Center. Lake Merritt. The Port. The Coliseum. Children's Fairyland. The Oakland Main Library. Each book hands the city a different role. Together they build an Oakland that is beautiful, bruised, and stubbornly present.

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| 1. | The series is named Talk of The Town, invoking Oakland's nickname. What does it mean to set a four-book series in a city that already has its own identity, its own mythology, its own contested meanings? How does the series honor that specificity rather than simply borrowing it? |
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2. Each book gives Oakland a different relationship to the story. In *Brass Secrets* it is a city of memory and archives. In *Harbor Code* it is a city of labor and pressure. In *Hall of Frame* it is a city of civic power and personal cost. In *Past and Perfect* it is a city of strained institutions and stubborn community. Which version of Oakland felt most alive to you, and why?

3. The series returns to the same specific locations across books: the Key and Cup, the coliseum, the waterfront, the library. What does it mean to let a place accumulate meaning across four novels? Which location carries the most weight by the end of the series, and what has it been asked to hold?

4. The series is dedicated to the city — patient, bruised, beautiful. By the final page, which of those three words feels most earned? And which feels most true to a place, real or imagined, that has shaped you?

II. THE CORE FOUR

Ben, Fiona, Maya, and Rich are in their mid-twenties when *Brass Secrets* opens in 2006. They are in their early forties by the end of *Past and Perfect* in 2023. The series is not a coming-of-age story. It is a staying story.

They are not always good to each other. They are not always honest. 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 series is interested in what that kind of relationship costs, and what it makes possible that nothing else does.

5. Each of the four carries the series differently. Ben carries the institutional weight — the inheritance, the political cost. Fiona carries the relational weight — the cost of being beside power without holding it. Rich carries the documentary weight — the obligation to witness honestly. Maya carries the legal weight — the obligation to act within a system even when it resists action. Which of these four burdens felt most familiar to you? Which felt most foreign?

6. Ben and Rich are estranged for five years at the center of the series. Neither was entirely right. Neither was entirely wrong. They were both telling themselves a story in which the other person was the problem. What made that rupture possible, and what finally made repair possible? Have you ever been in a version of that five years?

7. Fiona arrives in *Brass Secrets* with her own convictions, her own sense of what the city needs, her own voice. Over the following books, much of that energy goes into

supporting Ben's career rather than her own work — a choice that is never presented as wrong, but that the series tracks with care. What does it cost Fiona to set her own goals aside, even temporarily, even for someone she loves? And what does it mean that her clearest act of self-reclamation in Hall of Frame comes not as a private moment but as a public one?

8. Maya leaves Oakland, comes back, builds a career inside a system that frustrates her, and keeps showing up anyway. Her arc is less dramatic than Ben's and less visible than Rich's, but the series keeps returning to her. What is Maya's argument across four books? What does she understand that the others don't?

9. By the end of Past and Perfect, the four of them have stayed. Not in the same room, not always in the same city, but in each other's lives. The series suggests that staying is both the minimum requirement and the highest form of loyalty. Do you believe that? Has the series changed your answer?

10. Past and Perfect is the first novel in the series to bring children's voices into the foreground, children who are being sorted, categorized, and tracked before they are old enough to understand what is happening to them. None of the Core Four have children of their own. That is not an accident. What does the series gain by keeping its central characters one step removed from parenthood, watching what happens to the next generation rather than raising it? What different kind of responsibility does that create?

III. TUESDAY

Tuesday appears in every book. She is never fully explained. She carries things between people who need them, arrives without announcement, and leaves before anyone can ask the right questions. She is not an investigator, not a civilian, not an ally in any conventional sense.

"She leaves when the rest no longer belongs to her."

11. What is Tuesday? Not who — what function does she serve across the series? Each book gives her something different to carry. The series never answers this directly. If you had to describe her role in a single sentence, what would it be?

12. Tuesday's last line in Hall of Frame is: I saw what mattered. A woman still surrounded by love. Then she slips down the hall, footsteps quiet, measured, purposeful, the way someone leaves a story when they know the rest no longer belongs to them. Does she leave? Does she ever leave? What do you think Tuesday does after the last page?

13. In *Past and Perfect*, Tuesday delivers Grady's words — a final act of carrying something between the person who held it and the people who needed to receive it. This is what she has always done. Does that final appearance change how you understand everything she did in the earlier books?

IV. PAUL ELLSWORTH

Paul Ellsworth is sharp and capable. He understands systems, reads rooms, and knows how to move inside institutions. The series does not make him cartoonishly villainous. It is more interested in how a man who loves a city can become one of the forces working against it.

He appears in *Brass Secrets* as a power broker protecting something he has mistaken for stewardship. He appears in *Harbor Code* as a man beginning to realize that the system he helped build may no longer recognize him as its protector. In *Hall of Fame* he is in a prison laundry room, folding sheets until the edges are perfect, listening to Ben's name on a radio. In *Past and Perfect* he is largely absent — and that absence has a weight of its own.

"Deals have a way of coming due."

14. Paul Ellsworth and William Cooper are not opposites, though the series treats them that way at first. Both men believed they are protecting something real. The difference is in what they think protection requires — and what they are willing to do to people who stand in the way. By the end of the series, what is the clearest expression of the distance between them? Is it a decision, a moment, a consequence?

15. Paul's decline across the series is not dramatic. It is procedural. He loses leverage, then visibility, then the room. What does the series suggest about the particular fragility of power built on leverage rather than on something more durable?

16. Paul Ellsworth is never redeemed. The series does not rehabilitate him. But it also does not simplify him. By the end, what do you understand about Paul that you did not understand at the beginning? Does the series ask you to feel anything for him?

V. WHAT THE SERIES CARRIES

The *Talk of The Town* series moves from inheritance and discovery in *Brass Secrets*, through accountability and labor in *Harbor Code*, through distance and reconciliation in *Hall of Fame*, to stewardship and return in *Past and Perfect*. Each book asks a version of the same question. The series asks it as a whole.

17. The series argues, quietly and consistently, that preservation is not about freezing the past — it is about sustaining the conditions that allow the next generation to shape its own future. Where do you see that argument tested most severely across the four books? Where does the series come closest to losing faith in it?

18. Twenty years is the span of neglect. The phrase appears first in *Brass Secrets*. What does it mean that this phrase travels through the series without being handed down — that multiple characters arrive at it on their own?

19. The series tracks what institutions do under pressure: they strain before they break, and they often stop serving the people they were built for long before anyone declares a crisis. The port. The city. The courts. The library. Which institutional failure in the series felt most urgent, most familiar, or most difficult to read?

20. *Brass Secrets* opens with William Cooper building something in 1986 for a twenty-four-year-old he can only imagine. *Past and Perfect* ends with Ben's hand on a brass plate in a library, recognizing something before he understands what he is recognizing. What did William build, and what did it actually become? Did it work the way he intended? Does that matter?

21. The series ends with people staying. With music. With food that came from love and could not all be eaten. With the city still moving outside, and inside, them staying. Three words: Inside, they stayed. What has it taken all four books to earn that ending?

The Talk of The Town series is complete.

The work it describes is not.

Parker Daugherty

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