



HARBOR CODE

Talk of The Town Series · Book Two

A Guide for Book Clubs and Classroom Conversations

Harbor Code explores the systems that shape a city: ports, labor, redevelopment, loyalty, silence, and the hidden structures that determine who carries the weight when those systems begin to fail. Beneath the mystery and investigation is a story about pressure, institutional pressure, personal pressure, inherited pressure, and the choices people make while trying to survive inside it.

These questions are intended to encourage conversation, reflection, and interpretation. Some focus on character, others on systems, memory, labor, trust, and the emotional cost of carrying responsibility. Follow the threads that resonate most with your group.

I. THE PORT, THE CITY, AND THE WORK

The Port of Oakland is not simply a setting. It is a world governed by schedules, manifests, machinery, contracts, and unwritten rules. Labor here is identity, history, and inheritance. The novel takes that world seriously, and the questions it asks about power and accountability begin on the docks.

1.	Thomas Forrester has spent years learning how to move through the rhythms and dangers of the port. How does the novel portray dock work as more than employment? In what ways does labor become identity, responsibility, and community?
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2.	The port functions almost like its own living system throughout the novel, governed by schedules, manifests, machinery, contracts, and unwritten rules. Which parts of that system feel stable, and which parts feel fragile beneath the surface?
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3.	The novel repeatedly contrasts public narratives with private realities. How do official stories differ from what characters actually experience inside institutions like the port, the city, and law enforcement?
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4.	Redevelopment and economic pressure remain present in the background of Harbor Code. How does the changing waterfront mirror larger questions about who gets protected, who gets displaced, and who gets forgotten?
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II. POWER, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM

The novel avoids presenting power as simple or singular. Mallory, Ellsworth, city institutions, labor systems, and financial interests all operate differently, and none of them operates openly. The most dangerous power in the novel is the kind that leaves no paper trail.

5.	Paul Ellsworth spends much of the novel trying to maintain control while quietly realizing how much control he may already have lost. What moments reveal the gap between authority and actual security?
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6.	Harbor Code avoids presenting power as simple or singular. Mallory, Ellsworth, city institutions, labor systems, and financial interests all operate differently. Which form of power in the novel feels most dangerous, and why?
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7.	Several characters justify morally questionable choices by framing them as necessary, practical, or inevitable. At what point does justification become excuse? Did your opinion of any character shift as the novel progressed?
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8.	Mallory often believes he understands people because he understands leverage. What blind spots does that create for him throughout the story?
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III. CHARACTERS AT THE EDGE OF THEMSELVES

The most interesting moments in Harbor Code are not the confrontations but the realizations: the moment a character understands the scale of what they have stepped into, or recognizes that the system they trusted has been working against them all along.

9.	Maya begins the novel searching for answers about her father, but over time her role becomes much larger than investigation alone. What internal changes occur in Maya as she realizes the scale of what she has stepped into?
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10.	Paul Ellsworth is not presented as a traditional villain. The novel allows moments where he recognizes the systems surrounding him may no longer protect him. Did this change how you viewed him? Why or why not?
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11.	Clare Hinton's instincts often place her slightly ahead of the official narrative. What drives her persistence? Do you see her primarily as an investigator, an observer, or something more personal?
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12.	Several characters spend much of the novel feeling trapped inside systems larger than themselves. A cargo container. A holding cell. A waterfront contract. A political structure. An inherited obligation. How does the novel explore different forms of containment, both physical and emotional?
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13.	Harbor Code quietly continues the evolving relationships between Ben, Rich, Maya, and Fiona. What does the group make possible together that none of them could manage alone? How does their trust continue to evolve after the events of Brass Secrets?
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IV. WHAT THE NOVEL CARRIES

Oakland is deeply present throughout Harbor Code, not simply as setting, but as memory, economy, labor system, and emotional geography. The city shapes what the characters want, what they fear losing, and what they are willing to do to protect it.

14.	Throughout the novel, characters struggle with the difference between loyalty and silence. When does protecting someone become harmful? When does speaking become necessary?
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15.	The city itself feels deeply present throughout Harbor Code, not simply as setting, but as memory, economy, labor system, and emotional geography. How does Oakland shape the choices the characters make?
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16.	Harbor Code repeatedly asks whether systems built to preserve order eventually begin preserving themselves instead. Where do you see this tension operating most clearly in the novel?
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17.	Many of the novel's turning points happen quietly: a hesitation, a realization, a withheld truth, a conversation that changes meaning in retrospect. Which quiet moment in the novel stayed with you the longest?
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V. AFTER THE LAST PAGE

The novel ends without fully resolving every question it opens. That is not an oversight. Some of what Harbor Code carries is meant to travel forward into the next book, and into the reader.

18.	By the end of Harbor Code, several characters have gained knowledge they cannot easily set aside. What responsibility comes with seeing how systems actually operate beneath the surface?
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19.	What do you think the novel ultimately believes about cities and the people trying to protect them? Is Harbor Code hopeful, cautionary, unresolved, or all three at once?
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20.	If Brass Secrets explores inheritance and memory, Harbor Code explores systems and pressure. What emotional or thematic questions do you feel remain unresolved moving forward in the Talk of The Town series?
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Oakland is still moving.

The harbor is still working.

The systems are still running beneath the surface.

And the work of understanding them is never entirely finished.

Parker Daugherty

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