



BRASS SECRETS

Talk of The Town Series · Book One

A Guide for Book Clubs and Classroom Conversations

I began *Brass Secrets* with a simple goal: to finish a book. What grew from that goal was a story about a city I know, a generation that built something quietly and carefully, and the question of what happens when the people who were supposed to carry it forward almost don't.

The novel opens in Oakland in 1996. William Cooper is in a low-ceilinged room at the Chabot Science Center, making a plan that will take twenty years to either succeed or disappear. The plan is about records. About voices. About testimony that paper can't safely hold. By the time his son Ben inherits any of this, he doesn't know he's inherited anything. That's the problem.

The questions here are meant to open conversation, not close it. Take your time with the ones that land hardest.

I. THE CITY, THE ARCHIVE, AND WHAT GETS KEPT

The novel is set in a very specific Oakland. Lake Merritt. The Chabot Science Center. Children's Fairyland with its small mechanical story boxes, where a key turns and a voice comes alive. These aren't backdrop. They carry the argument.

William Cooper builds his archive because he believes voices survive where paper burns. The system he designs is meant to outlast him. Whether it can outlast indifference is a different question.

1.	William says the archive is stewardship, not burial. The curator asks what stops preservation from becoming its own kind of disappearance. Both of them are right to ask. When you think about what your own community keeps and what it lets fade, which side of that line does it tend to fall on?
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2.	William builds the system knowing he won't be around when it matters most. He designs it for a twenty-four-year-old he can only imagine. Joyce worries that inheritance can become burden as easily as purpose. What does it take to build something for a future you won't see?
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"Twenty years is the span of neglect."

3.	The twenty-year fuse is one of the most specific choices in the novel. Not ten years, not fifty. Twenty years is long enough for a child's voice on tape to grow into an adult's choice. Does that timeline feel right to you? What civic or community structures in your own experience seem to run on a similar clock?
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II. WILLIAM AND PAUL: TWO MEN, ONE CITY

William Cooper and Paul Ellsworth are not opposites. They both love Oakland. They both believe they are protecting something real. The difference is in what they think protection requires.

One of them is willing to work without recognition. The other needs the recognition to make the work feel worth doing.

4.	William and Paul represent two visions of what a city owes its people and what its people owe the city. Neither man is entirely wrong. What does each of them believe is worth protecting? Where do those beliefs come from, and where do they stop being defensible?
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5.	Paul Ellsworth is sharp and capable. He understands systems, reads rooms, and knows how to move inside institutions. The novel doesn't make him cartoonishly villainous. When does his intelligence become the most dangerous thing about him?
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6.	The idea of ownership runs through the novel in several forms: land, records, history, influence, the right to name a neighborhood. At what point does stewardship become ownership in a way that starts to corrupt the original intention? Where do you see that line crossed in the story?
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III. WHAT INHERITANCE ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

Ben Cooper doesn't know his father built anything. He discovers it the way you discover most inherited obligations: by accident, when it's almost too late, while doing something else entirely.

What he has, before he has anything else, is Rich, Maya, and Fiona. They are not a team in any formal sense. They don't have titles or jurisdiction. What they have is each other, and the willingness to stay in something uncomfortable.

7.	Ben notices something is wrong before he understands what it is. A missing file attachment. Initials that appear twice. A pattern that begins to whisper. He could have closed the folder and gone home. What keeps him from doing that, and what does his choice cost him before anything else is resolved?
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8.	The novel quietly pairs two generations of people trying to navigate the same city in different ways. The younger characters inherit questions the older characters never fully resolved. Which older and younger characters feel most connected to each other emotionally or philosophically? In what ways do they repeat, or resist, each other?
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9.	Loyalty and integrity pull in opposite directions at several points in the novel. Which moment stood out to you most? Was the character's choice the right one, or just the understandable one? Is there a difference? What does the group make possible that none of them could manage alone? And what do they each have to give up to stay in it?
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IV. TUESDAY AND THE LIMITS OF EXPLANATION

Tuesday is not easy to place. She is not an investigator. Not a civilian. Not an ally in any conventional sense. She appears when the story needs her, knows more than she explains, and disappears the same way.

The novel doesn't fully account for her. That's intentional.

10.	Tuesday shows up with information no one else has, operates without explaining herself, and leaves before anyone can ask the right questions. What do you make of her? What would the story lose if she were more transparent about who she is and what she knows?
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11.	In the epilogue, Tuesday pauses at the corner, touches the key at her throat, gives a small nod, and is gone. Word has come from Richmond. There is always another road. What do you think that road is? And what does it mean that she doesn't say goodbye?
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V. TESTIMONY, MEMORY, AND WHAT LASTS

The novel's central argument is that testimony is more durable than documents. Voices survive where paper burns. The vaults William builds are meant to hold both, but what he trusts most is the recorded voice, the human account, the version of events that the person who lived through it chose to put into words.

Whether that trust is justified is something the novel earns slowly.

12.	William builds a system to preserve community testimony against the day someone might want it erased. The novel is set in a city where rezoning meetings have already made neighborhoods disappear on paper. How does the choice to protect oral history read differently knowing that context? What kinds of records in your own community are most at risk of disappearing?
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13.	The novel ends with Ben standing in the doorway of the Key and Cup, a teacup warm in his hands, watching the street. Then he turns the sign to Open. It is a quiet ending for a story that carried a lot of weight. Does it feel earned? What has Ben actually become by that moment, and how much of it was his choice versus his inheritance?
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14.	If Brass Secrets makes a single claim about what a community owes the people who built it, what is that claim? Do you agree with it?
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Thank you for spending time with this story.

Oakland is still there. The keys are still in the drawer. The chain is still looking for people willing to carry it.

Parker Daugherty

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