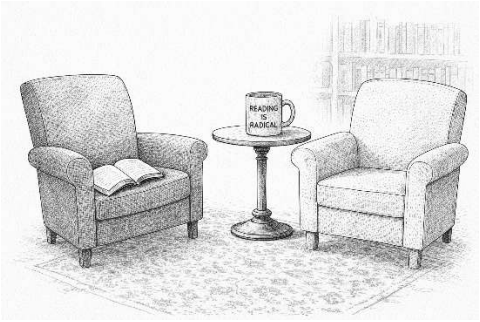


# PAST & PERFECT

Talk of The Town Series · Book Four

*A Guide for Book Clubs and Classroom Conversations*

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I began writing this series wondering what my own worldview might have been without access to the places that formed me. Without shelves to wander. Without stories to encounter. Without adults who believed that curiosity was worth protecting.

Past and Perfect is set in a world where that question has become practical. The Oakland Main Library opens four hours a day now. Three if there are not enough volunteers. A child asks how long learning takes. No one answers. The system is not broken. It is working exactly as designed.

The Core Four are back in Oakland, older, steadier in some ways and more uncertain in others. They are not trying to save the city. They are trying to do the next right thing and stay close enough to each other to keep doing it.

*Preservation is not about freezing the past. It is about sustaining the conditions that allow the next generation to shape its own future.*

*The questions here are meant to open conversation. Take your time with the ones that stay with you longest.*

## I. THE WORLD THE NOVEL OPENS INTO

The prologue is not set in Oakland. It is set somewhere institutional: rows of beds at identical angles, a schedule posted at the front of the room, names replaced by numbers, placement already decided before anyone arrives. The novel does not explain where this is. It does not need to.

By Chapter One, we are in a parking lot outside the Hall of Justice, where families have been waiting since dawn for a number to be called. The question the novel keeps asking is not whether this is wrong. It is who shows up anyway.

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| **1.** | The prologue sets a tone before we meet any of the main characters. A boy stands too long after instruction ends. Not defiant. Not exactly. Just out of rhythm. An officer approaches. The room corrects around him. It always did. What does it mean to open a novel about community and stewardship with that image? What is the novel asking you to hold from the very first page? |

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| **2.** | The Juvenile Delinquency Mediation Division exists because truancy rates surged and the courts needed somewhere to send the overflow. Its stated purpose is collaboration. In practice there is only one issue subject to consensus: attendance. The resolution, when it comes, is almost always procedural rather than meaningful. A signature. A promise. A date circled on a calendar. How does the novel use bureaucratic language to describe something that is not bureaucratic at all? Where else in the story does that gap appear? |

## II. MAYA AND THE LIMITS OF A RULING

Maya is a judge now. She has the authority to grant Jackie Avery's family what they came to ask for. She uses it. The ruling is correct. The record is updated. And then: Awaiting availability. High demand. Limited openings. No violation. No error. No appealable action.

Her ruling did not create space. It created eligibility.

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| **3.** | Maya believed what she said in her courtroom, until she understood the shape of it. The system does not resist urgency. It absorbs it. What does that realization cost her? And what does she do with the cost, given that the next case is already waiting? |

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| **4.** | Jackie Avery is six years old, assigned to Service and Logistics because she lingered near the kitchen in preschool. She sings all the time. Her attendance is perfect. Her parents brought everything: teacher notes, a crumpled recital program, a letter from a volunteer music instructor. What does it mean that the case that cracks Maya's certainty belongs to a child who is already compliant? What would have happened to Jackie if her parents had not known how to build a file? |

> *"If a child had to perform in order to align with a system designed for her education, then something upstream had already narrowed."*

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### III. RICH AND THE STORY THAT WILL NOT BLOW UP CLEANLY

Rich is back in Oakland, photographing what is changing. His editor wants a villain or a whistleblower. Preferably both. Rich wants it to be right. These are not the same thing, and the novel does not pretend they are.

His photos are edging away from art and toward documentation. He knows what that shift means.

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| **5.** | Rich remembers a librarian who showed him how to move from one catalog card to the next, how to trace a line of curiosity until it turned into something solid enough to stand on. He thinks of children growing up without that kind of room, without the ease of getting lost, without the muscle memory of discovery. Two years would become twenty in a blink. The span of neglect. Where have we heard that phrase before in this series, and what does it mean that Rich arrives at it independently, through a library, in a building that is half empty? |

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| **6.** | Rich interviews a district director who says visible presence increases compliance. Rich asks: compliance with what? The director says: enrollment expectations. Rich lets the phrase hang. He does not write the story that would blow up tomorrow. He writes the one that will be right. What does the novel suggest about the relationship between documentation and change? Is Rich's restraint a strength or a limitation? |

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### IV. BEN AND FIONA: WHAT ROOTEDNESS REQUIRES

Ben and Fiona spent three years in Kona, healing. The distance was mercy. Fiona gave piano lessons at a community center, one student first, then two. Ben worked at a foundation making sure future decisions would

be built on honest ground. Neither of them was shaping policy. Neither of them was visible. For a while, that felt like enough.

By the third year, the quiet began to itch.

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| **7.** | Fiona tells Ben she is not fragile, she is awake. He says he is not calling her fragile, he is saying she does not have to carry everything. She reaches for the tablet again, more carefully this time. That exchange is small. It is also the moment where the novel turns. What has changed between these two people since the accident, and what has the distance in Kona made possible that the hospital could not? |

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| **8.** | Ben's work at the Pacific Horizon Foundation is good work. The Foundation likes him because he asks better questions than most consultants and does not push for visibility. He likes it because when the laptop closes at the end of the day, it stays closed. But the consequences of his labor are abstract. Reports travel to places he will never visit. What is the novel saying about the difference between work that matters and work that is rooted? When Ben finds the brass plate above the library stairs, three keys crossed over the Bay Bridge, what does he understand that no one has told him? |

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### V. THE INSTITUTION UNDER STRAIN

The Oakland Main Library is not closed. It opens four hours a day. Three if there are not enough volunteers. The shelves are thinner, bare in places where whole sections have been removed. Most of the children who come in have never been inside a library before. They know what books are. They have seen them on screens.

Books still exist. Just not here. Not like this.

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| **9.** | The novel chooses not to show the institution in collapse. It shows it under strain: reduced hours, thin shelves, a separate door for children, volunteers who are tired. This is a more difficult thing to write about than collapse, because it requires readers to notice something that has not yet crossed the line into emergency. Why does that choice matter for what the novel is asking? |

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| **10.** | The community in the novel builds alternatives while still engaging the existing system. They do not wait for the institution to recover on its own. They also do not abandon it. What does that dual commitment look like in practice, and which character carries it most clearly? What does it cost them? |

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| **11.** | The title holds two meanings at once. The past, as in what we carry forward: books, education, curiosity, the conditions that allow the next generation to find itself. And perfect, as in the optimized system: tracked, categorized, efficient, designed not to fail. The novel does not resolve this tension. It asks readers to live inside it. Where do you feel that tension most in your own life? |

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### VI. NELLIE, TUESDAY, AND WHAT GETS NAMED

Ben's Grandy lived to be ninety-nine. The first librarian he ever loved. She donated more than a hundred books to the reading room that bears her name, titles she had lived with, margins still marked, spines softened by use.

Tuesday came to the gathering without announcement. No one was surprised. She sat off to the side with a cup of coffee, studying it as if it might say something back. Then she pulled out a composition notebook and read from it.

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| **12.** | Grandy had asked Tuesday to share her words when the time felt right. Tuesday read what she had written about each person in the room, what she loved about them and what she hoped for them. She named each one. What does it mean that Tuesday is the one who carries this, and that she delivers it without ceremony, and then leaves? What has Tuesday been doing across all four books, and does this final appearance change how you understand her? |

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| **13.** | The novel ends inside. Outside, the city keeps moving. Inside, they stay. That is the last sentence before the asterism: Inside, they stayed. It is four words. Why does the novel end there, and what has it taken all four books to earn that ending? |

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*Thank you for reading this far.*

*The places that shaped me are still there, some of them. Some are thinner than they were. Some are being held open by people who are tired but have not stopped. That is not a small thing. That is everything.*

**Parker Daugherty**

Underfoot Press · Talk of The Town Series

# FOR READERS OF THE FULL SERIES

Talk of The Town · Books One through Four

*Questions for readers who have finished all four novels*

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These questions are meant for readers who have finished all four novels. They do not work well as a guide to any one book. They work best when the whole series is present in the room, and when readers have had time to let the ending settle.

The Talk of The Town series spans roughly three decades in the lives of four people. It moves from inheritance and discovery in Brass Secrets, through accountability and labor in Harbor Code, through distance and reconciliation in Hall of Frame, to stewardship and return in Past and Perfect. Each book asks a version of the same question. The series asks it as a whole.

*What do we choose to carry forward? And who shows up to carry it?*

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## I. WHAT THE SERIES CARRIES

Ben Cooper inherits a mission he did not ask for from a father he barely knew. By the final book, he is making sure future decisions will be built on honest ground. He does not call it inheritance. The series does.

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| **1.** | Brass Secrets opens with William Cooper in a basement room in 1996, making a plan for a twenty-four-year-old he can only imagine. Past and Perfect ends with Ben standing in that same city thirty years later, his hand on the rail at the bottom of the library stairs, recognizing a brass plate on the wall 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? |

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| 2. | Across four books, Oakland is not backdrop. It is a participant. The Chabot Science Center. The Port. The Coliseum. The library. It changes, shrinks, strains, holds. The series is set in a specific city rather than a generalized urban America. What difference does that specificity make? What does Oakland carry in this series that no other city could? |

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| 3. | The series repeatedly returns to the idea 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? |

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## II. THE CORE FOUR OVER TIME

Ben, Fiona, Maya, and Rich are in their twenties in Brass Secrets. They are in their fifties by the end of Past and Perfect. The series is not a coming-of-age story. It is a staying story.

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| 4. | 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? |

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| 5. | Ben and Rich are estranged for five years at the center of the series. The reconciliation in Hall of Frame is one of the most carefully written scenes across all four books. Neither of them 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? |

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| 6. | Fiona is in a coma for much of Hall of Frame and in recovery through most of Past and Perfect. She is the character the series protects most carefully, and also the one it asks the most of. She is present as an absence for long stretches, and then returns fully herself, maybe more fully than before. What does her arc across the four books say about what it costs to dissolve inside a role that is not quite yours, and what it takes to come back? |

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| 7. | Maya leaves Oakland, comes back, builds a career inside a system that frustrates her, and keeps showing up anyway. Rich chases stories around the world, comes home for his mother, and finds the story that was always there. Their reconciliation is quieter than Ben and Rich's, built across small gestures rather than |

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| | one large conversation. Which of the four characters changed the most over the series? Which changed the least? Are those the same answer? |

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### III. TUESDAY

Tuesday appears in every book. She is never fully explained. She carries things between people who need them. She leaves before anyone can ask the right questions. In Past and Perfect, she reads Nellie's words aloud to the people Nellie loved, names each of them, and then excuses herself quietly, leaving the notebook on the coffee table.

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| **8.** | What is Tuesday? Not who, but what function does she serve across the series? The series does not answer this directly. Each book gives her something different to carry. If you had to describe her role in a single sentence, what would it be? |

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| **9.** | Tuesday's last line in the series, as she leaves Fiona's hospital room in Hall of Frame, is: I saw what mattered. A woman still surrounded by love. And 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? |

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### IV. WHAT THE SERIES ASKS OF YOU

The Talk of The Town series ends without resolution in the conventional sense. The institutions are still under strain. The system is still sorting children at five. Oakland is still Oakland, which means still fighting for itself, still beautiful, still exhausted, still here.

The series ends with people staying. With music on a stereo. With food that came from love and could not all be eaten. With the city keeping moving outside, and inside, them staying.

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| **10.** | The series argues, quietly and consistently, that the work is never done, that it is meant to be passed forward, and that showing up is both the minimum requirement and the highest form of loyalty. Do you believe that? Has reading the series changed your answer at all? |

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| **11.** | William Cooper built something in 1996 that he would not live to see completed. The question the series asks from its first pages is whether anyone will pick it up. What do you think the Core Four ultimately pass forward? Not symbolically. Concretely. What is in the room after they are gone? |

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| **12.** | The series is dedicated to the city. Not to its best moments or its history or its promise. To the city. Patient, bruised, beautiful. Which of those three words feels most true to the Oakland the series builds? And which feels most true to the place, real or imagined, that shaped you? |

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*The Talk of The Town series is complete.*

*The work it describes is not.*

**Parker Daugherty**

Underfoot Press · Talk of The Town Series