



DISCUSSION GUIDE

TROUBLE MAKERS

CATHERINE BARTER



ABOUT THE BOOK

Fifteen-year-old Alena never really knew her political activist mother, who died when she was a baby. She has grown up with her older half-brother Danny and his boyfriend Nick in the east end of London. Now the area is threatened by a bomber who has been leaving explosive devices in supermarkets. It is only a matter of time before a bomb goes off.

Against this increasingly fearful backdrop, Alena seeks to discover more about her past, while Danny takes a job working for a controversial politician. As her family life implodes, and the threat to Londoners mounts, Alena starts getting into trouble. Then she does something truly rebellious.

A searing, heartbreaking coming-of-age tale for fans of Lisa Williamson, Jenny Downham and Sarah Crossan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Barter grew up in Warwickshire, and then lived in Norwich for ten years, where she worked in a library, a bookshop, and for an organisation campaigning for the rights of garment workers. After gaining a PhD in American literature, she ditched academia for the lucrative world of independent bookselling. Currently she lives in East London and co-manages Housmans, a radical independent bookshop in King's Cross.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 'It unfolds in my mind in little pieces, the meaning of it, all the people who have lied.' The theme of lies is an important one in *Troublemakers*. Look back at all the examples of characters and their lies, big and small. Are there any lies that seem justified or even the right thing to do?
 2. *Troublemakers* is told in first person, present tense. What effect does hearing Alena's story in her own words have on the way you react? How does seeing events from her perspective help sustain tension?
 3. 'In three years I will be able to vote and I will still have less power than I did at the moment that I saw that email, which was such a tiny thing but look what happened.' Look at the different ways in which the characters have and use power in the novel: Alena forwards the incriminating email from Jacob Carlisle to the Hackney Standard, Danny has parental control over Alena, and Jacob Carlisle tries to capitalise on the terrorist's actions with his policies. Can you find more within the relationships depicted? What do you think the novel is saying about power?
 4. 'This is a really, really horrible mistake.' How much of Alena's actions are on purpose, or in reaction to something else? How do you think she will change after the book ends?
 5. Some of the characters are politically engaged and have strong views. Look at the different ideals they express. Do they always stand by them?
 6. In chapter forty-one, Alena is told the truth about Nick's 'car crash'. In chapter forty-five, we learn the real story about Alena's birth and her mother's death. How did these moments affect you when you read them?
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8. 'It's just that the world is this randomly violent place and you're supposed to be my responsibility.' One of the big themes of *Troublemakers* is responsibility – personally, socially, and being responsible for one's loved ones. Consider the different ways in which the characters are responsible and irresponsible.

9. 'Danny can't see anything good without thinking that he'll lose it.' Discuss Danny and his reasons for his overprotectiveness and secrecy.

10. 'I think she'll be a forgiving human with an open heart.' We learn several dark secrets about Alena's family in the course of the novel. Do you think you would be able to forgive the actions of the characters if you were Alena?

11. 'Like you've broken a bone or something, and then it heals differently. The other person becomes part of who you are.' Look back at how Nick and Danny's relationship is portrayed throughout the book. Do you agree with Tegan that their story is romantic?

12. 'It was in defence of a larger principle.' How do you feel about Alena's mother after learning about her actions on the march? Do you agree with Lynn that she might have been justified to hit the policeman?

13. *Troublemakers* also looks at the effects of terrorism on Londoners' lives. Do you relate to the events in the book? Can you think of examples from recent times which are similar? How do you think politicians and voters should respond to terrorism?

14. The family Alena is growing up in is considered unconventional by some of the other characters, and she compares it to her friends' families. Can you think of any other examples in books, film or television about non-traditional family lives?

Troublemakers is published in paperback in June 2017
ISBN: 9781783445240, RRP: £7.99

