

# Book Club Event Guide

"Suspenseful and oh-so-timely."

—TARA CONKLIN, *New York Times* bestselling author  
of *The Last Romantics* and *The House Girl*

## Girls with Bright Futures



*a Novel*

TRACY DOBMEIER  
WENDY KATZMAN

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# Music & Entertainment

## SPOTIFY PLAYLIST

Listen to the *Girls with Bright Futures* inspired playlist on Spotify created by Tracy & Wendy during your book club event at <https://spoti.fi/3aTfUZI>

1. "Pressure" by Billy Joel
2. "One Way or Another" by Blondie
3. "Winning" by Santana
4. "Suspicious Minds" by Fine Young Cannibals
5. "All Star" by Smash Mouth
6. "All I Do Is Win" by DJ Khaled, Snoop Dogg, T-Pain, Ludacris
7. "Rich Girl" by Daryl Hall and John Oates
8. "We Are The Champions" by Queen
9. "True Colors" by Cyndi Lauper
10. "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor
11. "Don't Stop Believin'" by Journey
12. "The Final Countdown" by Europe

## PARENTING STYLE QUIZ

Curious to know which parenting style fits you best? Take the "What's Your Parenting Style?" quiz to find out now: <https://bit.ly/3dRq8Zw>

Are you more like Alicia, Kelly, or Maren? Don't worry, we won't judge. Or tell anyone. Your secret's safe with us....



# Discussion Guide

Here is a list of questions to help guide your discussions for *Girls with Bright Futures*.

**WARNING: Spoiler alert on questions in this guide.**

1. When we enter the novel, Maren and Winnie are having a tough conversation with the Elliott Bay Academy (EBA) college counselor regarding the Stanford early admissions process. What do you glean from this conversation? How is this conversation different from how the other moms and their daughters learn about the Stanford news? What does this say about schools like EBA, their politics, and how they operate?
2. Maren and Winnie planned to emphasize Winnie's first-gen status as a "hook" for college admissions. What would college admissions look like without this and other hooks such as athletics, legacy, or development priorities? Are any aspects of this system fair? Is there an argument for scrapping the whole system? If the system were 100 percent merit based, do you think parents would be any less manic about college?
3. When Maren compares herself to Alicia, Kelly, and the other EBA parents, she struggles to feel like a well-connected provider. Even Kelly, who is wealthy by every reasonable standard, feels inadequate in comparison to Alicia. How do Maren and Kelly handle these negative self-comparisons?
4. The three women in this book are vastly different from one another. However, they share a common goal—securing what's best for their child. What do you make of the dynamic in which each character's actions seemed to push another character to go to further lengths to achieve her goals? Where and why do you think they crossed a line? Is there any justification for their manipulations?
5. There are moments of humor throughout the novel that speak to the ridiculous lengths the characters will go to in order to get ahead. What was one of your favorite moments that made you think I can't believe they did that? Have you ever encountered a person or situation that mirrors the EBA parents' behavior?
6. Throughout the novel, Maren struggles with the trauma in her own past and Winnie's origin story. If you were in Maren's position, would you have consented to a face-to-face meeting with Chase and Naomi? If you were in Winnie's position, would you have taken the donor match test to see if you could help Eli?

# Discussion Guide (continued)

7. Maren's life is fundamentally altered by Chase's criminal assault, whereas Chase suffers few consequences. Do you believe someone who commits such a heinous act can be redeemed through future good behavior? How do you feel about Chase by the end of the novel? Does he have more or less integrity than Alicia? How about Kelly?
8. DNA testing plays a role in the novel. Have you ever taken a consumer DNA test or allowed your child to be tested? What are some of the positives and negatives associated with widespread use of this technology?
9. *Girls with Bright Futures* ends with details about where the families are in one year. How do you think the mother-daughter relationships will evolve over the next few years? Will the mothers remain as involved in their daughters' college lives, their decisions about jobs or graduate schools, or even their romantic relationships?
10. Ultimately, what do you think *Girls with Bright Futures* says about how privilege, opportunity, and ambition cycle through our society? Do you see any parallels between the novel and our current culture? To your own life experiences? Are parents today more amped up about college competition than in previous generations? If so, why? Are there any obvious fixes that would lessen the intensity?



# A Conversation with Tracy & Wendy

## **GIRLS WITH BRIGHT FUTURES FOLLOWS THREE MOTHERS AS THEY FIGHT FOR THEIR DAUGHTERS' FUTURES. OF THE THREE LEAD WOMEN, DID YOU HAVE A FAVORITE TO WRITE? DID YOU HAVE ANY CHALLENGES FINDING THEIR UNIQUE VOICES?**

Would you ever confess to having a favorite child? We loved writing each of our leading ladies, but that doesn't mean we weren't rooting for one of them (cough, cough—rhymes with SPAREN). We started with a pretty clear vision of what we wanted to accomplish for each of the women vis-à-vis the Stanford competition, but their individual voices took a lot of work. We spent a ton of time creating elaborate backstories for each of our main characters, much of which never made it into the novel, but this exercise helped reveal their voices organically. People always ask how we write together, and this is a key element. We leverage the fact that there are two of us, so we each take primary responsibility for different characters to start. We'll never reveal who writes what, because in the end, we edit absolutely every word together, but dividing things up really helps us more quickly and easily discover and individualize our characters' voices.

## **WHAT RESEARCH DID YOU HAVE TO DO TO BRING THE EBA COMMUNITY TO LIFE? HOW DID YOU DELVE INTO THE COMPLICATED WORLD OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS?**

Between us, we have four kids ranging in age from 13 to 23. Although *Girls with Bright Futures* is not autobiographical and the EBA parent community is wholly fictional, you could say we've been "conducting research" for nearly twenty years while our kids attended various schools, participated in numerous sports and extracurriculars, and, of course, applied to college. One of the things we were struck by during the college admissions process was the existence of what we refer to as the "college admissions industrial complex." This complex, which didn't exist when we were applying to college, feels designed to prey on parents' insecurities and anxieties. By the time kids reach high school, they and their parents become the targets of sophisticated marketing campaigns from, for example, colleges and universities looking to increase their applicant pools; standardized testing services looking to build their market shares; and private consultants selling services (usually expensive ones), such as test prep, résumé building, essay writing, far-flung service trips, college-tour planning, and athletic recruitment. In the face of such overwhelming "opportunities," parents worry: Are we doing enough? Maybe we need another six-hour package of tutoring for the ACT? Or maybe we need to find a way to send them to one of those summer programs at [insert name of selective university]? One of our favorites was an email from a test prep company admonishing ninth graders to set up their LinkedIn profiles to showcase their awards and honors. We had a good laugh over that one, especially since one of us (who shall remain nameless) still had not figured out how to make her own LinkedIn profile.

# A Conversation (continued)

In addition to anecdotal experience, we devoured newspaper and magazine articles and several nonfiction books about the college process. Two of our favorite books in this vein were *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* by William Deresiewicz and *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania* by Frank Bruni. We were actually completing the first draft of our manuscript when the Operation Varsity Blues college admissions scandal broke, and suddenly, this world we'd been depicting was all anyone could talk about. We found it validating on some level that our chosen topic was clearly part of the zeitgeist. And like most people, we were shocked by the extent of the criminality. What we were not surprised by was the parental anxiety component.

## **AS COAUTHORS, WHAT DOES YOUR BRAINSTORMING AND WRITING PROCESS LOOK LIKE? WHAT'S THE BEST PART OF WORKING AS A TEAM?**

By far the best part of working as a team is having another person who is equally invested in every single aspect of the book...and all the laughter. We have a really good time, and at least one of us is usually able to remember why we made a certain decision or changed a particular detail. Our best brainstorming happens on long walks or over text late into the night. We typically write side by side and spec out all plot points chapter by chapter. One of our favorite moments is sharing a new chapter with each other and the surprise of seeing how our partner creatively accomplished each goal.

## **WHEN WRITING THE SUSPENSE ASPECT OF *GIRLS WITH BRIGHT FUTURES*, HOW DID YOU MAP OUT ALL THE TWISTS AND TURNS? DID YOU KNOW "WHODUNIT" GOING INTO THE PROJECT?**

We are both laughing right now hoping that the other one remembers how we mapped it all out! As a writing team, we are plotters out of necessity, so we figured out the major twists and turns before we started writing. We had poster boards with color-coded sticky notes all over them spread across Tracy's dining room table and floor for months as we tried to keep track of what each character knew and what the reader knew at any given point in time. As we got further into the writing and editing process, our characters added a few twists and turns of their own, further complicating our storyboards. And then our fabulous editor, MJ Johnston, had great suggestions for heightening the suspense. We had a strong sense from the start about "whodunit" and why, although we did play around with a few alternate ideas before eventually coming back full circle to our original plan.

# A Conversation (continued)

## **IF YOU HAD A CHILD ATTENDING EBA, WHICH CHARACTER WOULD YOU AVOID AT THE SST MEETINGS?**

All of them! Just kidding! But seriously, we intentionally amplified the crazy in the SST meetings and at EBA in general to show the very real temporary insanity that seems to overtake so many of us during the stressful college admissions process, which can affect friendships and even our self-worth as parents. It's a very insecure time for all involved. The truth is that like anywhere, some people are truly awful no matter the situation, and some people are absolute saints, but most of us fall somewhere in between, and the college madness makes people act in ways detrimental to all types of relationships. We are only seeing a snapshot of these SST women during the height of anxiety. Some of them may have been lovely, normal people before the toxic college race, and they may go back to that after. But during, the general rule is "steer clear!"

## **GIRLS WITH BRIGHT FUTURES IS A FANTASTIC BLEND OF SUSPENSE TWISTS WITH A LIGHTER, OFTEN-COMIC LOOK AT THE ABSURDITY OF ONE ELITE COMMUNITY. HOW DID YOU STRIKE A BALANCE BETWEEN THE DARKER, MORE SUSPENSEFUL SCENES AND THE LEVITY OF THE EBA PARENTS AND THEIR HIJINKS?**

Our natural tendency veers toward humor, but we wanted to write domestic suspense, so it was definitely a balancing act. We approached striking that balance the way we used to make mix tapes (or in today's parlance— a playlist). You need to vary the speed and tempo to keep things interesting. We intentionally juxtaposed suspenseful and emotional scenes with the more comedic EBA parent scenes as a way of heightening the drama but also to further emphasize the absurdity of the college madness.





# Menu Suggestions

The main characters in *Girls with Bright Futures* are all stress-eaters. Consider a menu filled with comfort foods. Try Tracy's Best-Ever Seattle Grilled Cheese Sandwich and Tomato-Basil Soup recipes, along with Wendy's favorite Theo™ Chocolate Chunk Brownies recipe.

## TRACY'S BEST-EVER SEATTLE GRILLED CHEESE SANDWICH

*There are so many versions of grilled cheese sandwiches that you can easily go crazy trying to perfect the art. However, after twenty years of cooking for our families, we prefer simple and delicious over fancy and impressive. This is how we do it.*

### INGREDIENTS:

Favorite white sandwich bread or mild sourdough (best if it's not too dense)

Well-aged extra sharp white cheddar cheese\*

Salted butter at room temperature

\* Our absolute favorite is Beecher's Handmade Cheese™ Flagship Cheddar Cheese ([www.beechershandmadecheese.com](http://www.beechershandmadecheese.com))

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Lightly butter one side of each piece of bread and lay buttered sides down on a cutting board
2. Slice cheese and lay slices to cover every other piece of bread, then close the sandwich so buttered sides face out
3. If you have a George Foreman grill or panini press, use it! If not, a cast iron pan or any pan will do, though we tend to prefer the result on pans that aren't non-stick. If necessary, add a touch more butter to the pan to toast the edges
4. Eat hot, dip in your tomato-basil soup, and watch your troubles melt away



## TOMATO-BASIL SOUP

by Hollin Brodeur and adapted by Tracy Dobmeier

\*[Tracy's notes in brackets]

*Our hands-down favorite tomato soup in Seattle is house-made at the local grocery chain Metropolitan Market. The only thing we would change from that soup is reducing the cream content. So Tracy went on a hunt to find a recipe that would closely mimic this Met Market soup but could be made at home with a little less cream (thus somewhat reducing our guilt over the loads of delicious Beecher's™ cheese in the accompanying decadent grilled cheese sandwiches). Met Market doesn't publish their recipe anywhere, but we found a blog that had tried to recreate the soup. We give this recipe a huge thumbs up—and note it can be made entirely vegan by using vegetable broth and leaving out the cream entirely. And it is truly just as delicious (although Tracy usually sneaks in a hint of heavy cream...just because).*

# Menu Suggestions (continued)

## TOMATO-BASIL SOUP

### INGREDIENTS:

- 2-3 large cans of whole plum tomatoes [diced or even crushed tomatoes work fine too—use entire contents of cans, juice included]
- 1 *large* bunch of basil leaves, reserve a few for the end [I have also used dried basil to taste in a pinch...still delicious]
- 1 large carrot, chopped
- 1 large onion, sliced [I have lately been enjoying the milder flavor of Walla Walla Sweet Onions when they are available]
- 1 zucchini, chopped
- 1 celery, chopped
- 2-3 cups of vegetable broth (2 cups for a thicker soup) [I always start with 2 cups, then add more at end to thin out the soup a bit]
- 1/4-1/2 cup heavy cream (to taste) [or leave out entirely]
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 Tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Pinch of red pepper flakes

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Heat olive oil in a large soup pot
2. Sautee chopped onions until cooked and translucent
3. Add garlic and cook for a minute or two
4. Add carrot, zucchini, celery, and basil and cook for a few minutes
5. Add tomatoes (with juices) and vegetable broth
6. Bring soup to a boil, then reduce and simmer approximately 25-30 minutes
7. Once vegetables are thoroughly cooked, remove from heat
8. Using an immersion blender (or a regular blender) blend the soup till it's nice and smooth. (If using a regular blender, let cool first and then blend the soup in batches until it's smooth)
9. Add heavy cream into the soup
10. Put the soup back on low heat and add salt and pepper to taste, and a pinch of red pepper flakes
11. Top with some basil leaves and serve with Tracy's Best-Ever Seattle Grilled Cheese Sandwiches!

# Menu Suggestions (continued)

## WENDY'S FAVORITE THEO™ CHOCOLATE CHUNK BROWNIES\*

by Theo Chocolate™

\*<https://theochocolate.com/blog/theo-chocolate-chunk-brownies/>

*When it comes to comfort desserts, our opinion is that it must include chocolate. Seattle is a mecca of independent chocolatiers and Theo Chocolate™ is a leader. Their mission "is to create a more beautiful, compassionate, and enduring world by responsibly making delicious and inspiring products for everyone." So not only is their chocolate amazing, so is their mission. Theo Chocolate™ Chunk Brownies are a great basic brownie to which you can add your own twist...crushed candy canes or white chocolate drizzle or rainbow sprinkles or sea salt pretzels. Your imagination is your only limitation.*

Makes 16 brownies (but those brownies are going to be awfully small. You might want to double the batch and use a larger pan. Seriously.)

### INGREDIENTS:

12 ounces Theo™ 70% dark chocolate bar of your choice, chopped and divided (if you substitute with another brand, make sure it's still 70% cacao)

¾ cup granulated sugar

¼ cup packed light brown sugar

½ cup unsalted butter (ideally softened)

⅔ cup all-purpose flour

½ teaspoon kosher salt

3 eggs

½ teaspoon vanilla extract

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Line an 8-inch square baking pan with parchment paper or aluminum foil, leaving a small overhang to facilitate removing the finished brownies. Butter the lining or spray it with nonstick cooking spray, and set the pan aside
2. Melt 8 ounces of the chocolate in a double boiler along with the sugars and butter, stirring occasionally, and set aside to cool slightly. Sift the flour and salt together into a small bowl and set aside
3. Whisk the eggs into the warm chocolate mixture one at a time until thoroughly combined, then whisk in the vanilla. Gently stir in the dry ingredients in two batches, then stir in the remaining 4 ounces chopped chocolate. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake for about 20 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with moist crumbs attached, but not wet with raw batter
4. Cool completely before cutting (if you can wait that long!) These are also delicious served chilled

# Cocktails & Mocktails

## THE BASE JELL-O™ SHOT RECIPE

*A grown-up twist on a college classic...*

*"If you drink enough of these, any college will sound good!"*

A 3-ounce box of gelatin will make about 16 1-ounce shots. Multiply as needed to make more or to fit bigger cups.

### THE COSMOPOLITAN JELL-O™ SHOT

1 3-ounce box cranberry gelatin	2 ounces triple sec
1 cup boiling water	Splash of lime juice
4 ounces vodka (plain or citrus flavored)	¼ cup cold water

### THE CREAMSICLE JELL-O™ SHOT

1 3-ounce box orange gelatin	2 ounces triple sec *
1 cup boiling water	¼ cup cold water
4 ounces whipped cream or vanilla vodka	

*\*If you would like a little more orange in your creamsicle shot, replace 1 ounce of triple sec with orange juice. It ramps up the citrus just enough without overwhelming the vodka.*

### THE LEMON DROP JELL-O™ SHOT

1 3-ounce box lemon gelatin	2 ounces triple sec
1 cup boiling water	¼ cup cold water
4 ounces lemon or citrus vodka	



#### DIRECTIONS:

1. Mix the liquors and any juices with cold water and chill in the refrigerator until they're a consistent temperature
2. Pour the gelatin into a bowl
3. Add the boiling water, stirring until the gelatin is completely dissolved
4. Stir in chilled liquor, juice, and water mix
5. Pour into shot glasses, molds, or a baking pan for a sheet of Jell-O™ to cut once set
6. Refrigerate until liquid sets. This should be at least 2 hours, but overnight is recommended
7. Serve cold

For more recipe suggestions visit:

<https://www.thespruceeats.com/jell-o-shot-recipes-popular-cocktails-759004>

# Cocktails & Mocktails (continued)

## SHIRLEY, THERE'S A COLLEGE FOR EVERYONE MOCKTAIL

*Adapted from Bon Appetit's Shirley Temple Recipe*

### **INGREDIENTS:**

Splash of grenadine  
1 can Ginger Ale  
1 Maraschino Cherry

### **DIRECTIONS:**

1. Place grenadine in a (red Solo) cup
2. Fill with ice
3. Add ginger ale to fill the cup
4. Garnish with a Maraschino cherry



# About the Authors

After supporting each other through two decades of motherhood, TRACY DOBMEIER and WENDY KATZMAN thought: "Let's write a book and *really* test the friendship." Several years later their friendship is not only still intact, but they would even go so far as to grade it an A+. With such a perfect GPA, maybe they should apply to Stanford? Just kidding! They would never leave Seattle where they live (not together, though it often feels that way) with their husbands, pets, and last remaining school-age kiddo.



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