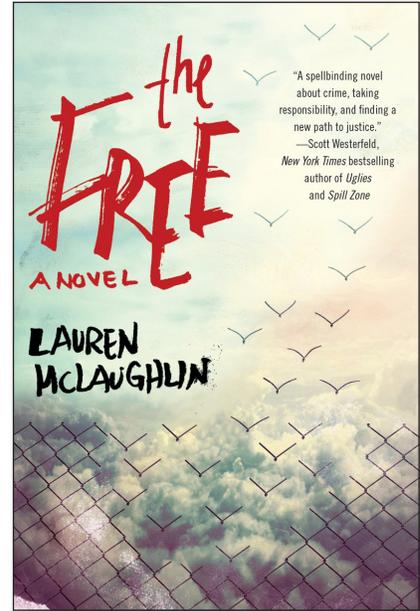


# The Free Discussion Guide

## About the Author

Lauren McLaughlin spent ten years as a screenwriter and producer before turning her attention to novels. She is also the author of the YA novels *Cycler*, *(Re)Cycler*, and *Scored*, as well as the children's picture book *Wonderful You* and the series, *Mitzi Tulane, Preschool Detective*. She enjoys speaking with readers, teachers, students and anyone who loves books as much as she does. Visit her website, [laurenmclaughlin.net](http://laurenmclaughlin.net), or follow her on Twitter: @LaurenMcWoof.



## Book Overview

A 21st century response to Walter Dean Myers's classic *Lockdown*.

In the beginning, Isaac West stole to give his younger sister, Janelle, little things: a new sweater, a scarf, just things that made her look less like a charity case whose mother spent money on booze and more like the prep school girls he's seen on the way to school.

But when his biggest job to date, a carjacking, goes wrong, Isaac chooses to take the full rap himself, and he's cut off from helping Janelle. He steels himself for 30 days at Haverland Juvenile Detention Facility. Friendless in a dangerous world of gangs and violent offenders, he must watch his every step.

Isaac's sentence includes group therapy, where he and fellow inmates reenact their crimes, attempting to understand what happened from the perspective of their victims. The sessions are intense. And as Isaac pieces together the truth about the circumstances that shaped his life—the circumstances that landed him in juvie in the first place—he must face who he was, who he is . . . and who he wants to be.

## Questions for Discussion

1. What would this story have looked like from Janelle's perspective? Or Barbie Santiago's? Is there another character whose side of the story you'd be interested in hearing?

2. Where do you think the characters (especially Isaac, Janelle and Barbie) end up ten years later?

3. How would you describe Isaac's relationship with his mother? Was Isaac justified in doing what he did to her?

4. Isaac believes his stealing is justified because he's doing it for his sister, Janelle. Do you agree? Is stealing ever justified?

5. Isaac lied to his therapy group in order to protect his crime partner. Was he right to do so? Where should his loyalty lie?

6. Isaac sees his teacher and crime boss, Tom Flannery, as a father figure. How important is a male role model for a teenage boy? Have you ever looked up to someone who turned out to be a bad influence? Do you know someone who has? What would you tell them?

7. The United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other country. Is this justified? Are there other ways of dealing with youth offenders?

8. Many people believe that character is hard-wired and that culture and up-bringing only play a small role in determining a person's actions. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

9. Can you identify any cultural factors or biographical details that may have nudged Isaac toward his life of crime? What would have to change in society for kids like Isaac and Janelle to be safe and to thrive?

10. Isaac's therapy group focuses a lot on empathy. Why is empathy important? Can you name examples from your own life where you practiced empathy or witnessed empathy in others?

11. Isaac has a painful secret about his past. Why does he keep this secret? Why does it have so much power over him?

12. If you were to cast a movie version of *The Free*, who would you cast as Isaac? Janelle? Barbie? Isaac's mother? Dr. Horton?

13. Isaac describes the girls of Haverland Juvenile Detention Center as "damaged goods." He also has negative ideas about his own gender. Why do you think that is? Is there something from his background or upbringing that may have influenced him?

14. Isaac is a poor student who doesn't like to read until he starts reading poems written by other inmates. Why do you think he changes his mind? What made you love reading? Why?

15. Did your feelings for Isaac change throughout the story? Why? What about the other characters? Did your feelings for them change?

16. Even if you've never committed a crime or been incarcerated, could you identify with Isaac's situation and life choices? Why? What elements of Isaac's life are universal?

17. Youth offenders have fewer legal rights than adult offenders, which gives judges more latitude in sentencing. Is this fair? Should youth offenders ever be charged as adults? Why? Why not?