

Explosion on the Sound — Book Club Questions

A discussion guide for *Explosion on the Sound*, Book 1 of the On the Sound Series. Pick the sections that suit your group.

Before you begin

These questions assume everyone has finished the book. They name the killer, the motive and the ending.

Twelve to fifteen questions fill a typical ninety-minute meeting, so most groups will want to choose two or three sections rather than work through all of them. The opening questions suit any group. After that, pick by what your readers care about: character, moral argument, or how the book is put together.

Questions marked ★ are the ones most likely to split a room.

Opening questions

1. The novel opens with MJ reaching for the door handle as City Hall explodes, then jumps back three hours. What did that structure do to your reading? Did knowing what was coming make Chapter Two unbearable, or did it make you notice things in the parent meeting you would otherwise have skimmed?
2. MJ is late because she stopped for eggs and walked her dog. Being late saves her life and, in her own mind, kills Troy. How did you feel about that coincidence — as a reader, and as a moral matter?
3. Who did you suspect, and when? Did you land on Forsberg, Atherton, Aspen, Justin — or Jay Butler? What did the book do to steer you?
4. The bomb arrives inside a gesture of compassion: Council Member Silva asked unhoused people to bring in bags of their belongings so the council could see how little they carried. Why do you think the author chose that, rather than a bomb hidden in a car or a trash can?

MJ Brooks

1. MJ says of herself that she usually gives silence "a cursory effort, and then boom, almost before she knew it, her thoughts were out there." Is that a flaw, a gift, or the same thing wearing two hats?

2. ★ MJ repeatedly inserts herself into a federal investigation — the yearbooks, the kids outside The Docks, the McChicken trade, the homeless camp, chasing Garrison out of the 7-Eleven. Was she brave or reckless? Would you judge her differently if she had been wrong about Dylan?
3. She tells herself she is helping. She also admits that doing something is the only thing holding her together. Can an act be genuinely useful and self-medicating at once?
4. Claire describes MJ as one of the toughest young women she knows and says she has never seen her so affected. Toni says MJ bottles things up, worries about everyone else, and pretends she is fine. Which woman reads her more accurately?
5. Carrie tells MJ that Troy always said she had "the heart of a warrior — the way you fight for what you think is right. Even if it sometimes causes us administrators some heartburn." What does it mean to MJ to hear that after he is gone?
6. MJ kept the Bronco and the dog in the divorce. What do those two choices tell you about her before she tells you anything herself?
7. Amber asks MJ, "Are you sure you're in the right profession?" MJ blushes. By the end, does the book think she is?

Jefferson Hughes

1. Jefferson becomes a cop because of his brother Alex's addiction — a decision no one in his family understands. He reasons that getting dealers off the streets "might not save his own brother, but it could save someone's." Has that bargain worked out for him?
2. ★ Jefferson looks at Rachel and sees someone who has wasted her life and will rob MJ blind. MJ looks at the same girl and feels only sadness. Neither is exactly wrong. Which response would you want from a detective, and which from a teacher?
3. MJ tells him, gently, "if you have lost someone, I'm sorry." He leaves the room without answering. Why does her sympathy land harder on him than any accusation would?
4. Jefferson sticks to the rulebook because a rule-breaking partner once nearly ended his career. How does the book treat rule-following — as integrity, as armor, or as a way of not having to decide?
5. His father was destroyed by a political campaign over false allegations. Rory jokes that you have to be dead inside to be good at politics, and Jefferson thinks his father "must not have been dead enough on the inside. And now he was just dead." How does that inheritance shape how he reads Forsberg and Atherton?
6. Jefferson is awkward with MJ from the first moment — the dog, the shirt, the wet patch on her sofa. Did the comedy of those early scenes make you trust him more or less?
7. He carries the duffel bag into the woods himself. Justin gets the magazine features and the fan accounts. Jefferson calls his own act "all nonsense — I did my job." Does the book agree with him?

Joe Garrison and what justice means

1. Garrison lost three children — Jonah, Macey and Bella — in a house fire in a development with no water pressure to fight it. His wife later died by suicide. Did knowing his reasons change how you read what he does? Should it?
2. ★ He tells MJ: "The government isn't interested in real justice. Death is the only real justice for them." The book has just shown us a city that overruled its own fire inspector and hid its investors behind shell companies. How much of his indictment does the novel agree with — and where exactly does it part company with him?
3. He took the city's settlement, he says, "only so I could become their worst enemy." What does it mean that he funded his revenge with their apology money?
4. "I feel nothing now. It doesn't matter to me who lives or dies." Is Garrison a man destroyed by grief, or a man who chose to stop feeling? Does the book let us tell the difference?
5. He moves through the homeless community calling himself Job — the man who lost everything and stayed faithful. Aspen finds the name creepy; Rory explains it. What is Garrison claiming by taking it, and has he earned it?
6. After the blast he reaches down to help MJ up, wearing a necktie covered in grinning pumpkins. Why do you think the author gave the villain that gesture, and that tie?
7. His plan requires murdering Dylan — a boy who did exactly what he was asked and never looked in the bag. Is that the moment Garrison forfeits our sympathy, or had he already?
8. ★ Garrison wanted the crowd to hear what Atherton and Butler had done before he killed them. He is stopped, so they never do — the vigil ends in an arrest, not a confession. Is there any sense in which the ending leaves him right?

Dylan, Rachel and who gets seen

1. Garrison's plan works because a young homeless man carrying a duffel bag is invisible. Dylan walks past every camera without hiding his face, and the detectives note how strange that is. What is the novel saying about who gets looked at and who does not?
2. ★ Dylan grew up in Leafland Estates, among the most expensive homes in the county, and gave it up to live in a tent by a freeway exit because he loved Rachel. Rachel says it herself: "I thought it was because he loved me." Is Dylan a victim, a fool, or something the book refuses to simplify?
3. His last act is to call his mother and apologize. He is shot minutes later, with five thousand dollars still in his shoes. What did that chapter do to you?
4. Rachel was a bright, observant eighth grader who wrote with real intensity. Shannon says she "really thought she'd make it." The book offers reasons — a mother who left, a father in prison, a grandmother raising her — without making them an equation. Where does the novel locate responsibility for what happened to her?
5. Aspen Klein is abrasive, performatively anti-religious, and genuinely devoted to the people she serves. Forsberg says she "has a heart much bigger than her temper." Did you warm to her? Does the book need her to be likeable?
6. MJ buys information with a dollar, then five, then ten, then a McChicken and fries and an ice cream cone. Those scenes are funny. Are they also uncomfortable?

7. Maggie, the retired librarian in the camp, opens up only when MJ recognizes the Thomas Hardy in her hands. What does that exchange suggest about what actually reaches people?
8. The city has outlawed public camping; Aspen says those people have nowhere to go; Forsberg voted no and lost. The novel gives the argument several sides and declines to settle it. Did that feel honest or evasive to you?

Grief, guilt and permission to mourn

1. "Troy was gone because of her. And she'd been late. If she'd been on time, at least they would have died together." MJ knows this is a stupid thought and believes it anyway. Have you seen that kind of arithmetic in real grief?
2. ★ MJ cannot face Kevin, Troy's partner. Her mother and Shannon both push her; she refuses. She says later that she "never really felt she deserved to grieve like everyone else." Where does that come from — guilt, pride, or a sense that her grief would be taking something from Kevin?
3. When they finally meet, Kevin says nothing and simply holds her "like he was trying to hug her for both himself and Troy." Why is that the right scene, and why does it work without dialogue?
4. Julia warns MJ: "after we catch this guy ... your grief might just come and punch you in the gut. Be ready for it. Keep your friends close." Does the book bear her out?
5. MJ hates crying. Toni tells the story of the bike and the two bloody knees — watering eyes, not one tear. Then MJ sobs in her mother's arms over the smell of her own car. Why is the Bronco the thing that finally breaks her?
6. Jay Butler objects to the mural because it would "immortalize" one principal. MJ privately agrees the mural is wrong, because Troy hated attention — but decides Butler is wrong about why: "It was for them, not Troy." What does that distinction say about who memorials are for?
7. Shannon tells MJ: "be careful that you don't internalize too much. Don't run yourself ragged trying to make everything better ... We need each other right now." Does MJ hear her?
8. On the water, MJ wonders whether anyone is up there, and whether Troy and the others "had to be somewhere, didn't they?" The novel leaves the question open. Did you want it answered?

Complicity: how Green Hill happened

The chain is worth reconstructing out loud before you discuss it. Atherton Development skipped a required fire pump. The city inspector blocked occupancy. Atherton brought families to the council meeting to plead. Several had already sold their homes and were living in hotels. The council overruled its own inspector. The families signed waivers releasing the city. Three children died. Two of the council members who voted yes were quietly investors.

1. ★ Where in that chain would you put the blame — and how much is left over for Garrison himself, who signed the waiver?
2. Forsberg voted yes. She says: "my progressive friends and I were moved by their stories. I should have known better than to vote in favor of something Atherton wanted." Is being moved by the right people for the wrong reasons a defense, or the whole problem?
3. Jay Butler is a petty, self-serving nuisance for most of the book — and then turns out to be the single largest investor and the biggest beneficiary. How did that reveal change your reading of his earlier scenes?
4. Atherton feeds the police station, funds Aspen's shelter and courts her support for a council seat. He also reads the room at the vigil and declines the microphone. Is he a villain, an operator, or simply a man who never has to see the consequences?
5. Ron explains that the Financial Transparency Act is the only reason anyone can see who profited. Without that law, Garrison's accusation stays unprovable forever. What is the novel arguing about transparency — and about who gets believed when they cannot prove it?
6. Garrison lost the lawsuit and took a payoff. Forsberg calls what happened "one of the worst things our city has ever done" and says she will "forever regret" her part. Regret, a settlement, and no one charged. Is that the book's real indictment?
7. The elected officials who voted yes are dead or badly injured by the end, and the investors are exposed. Is that justice, coincidence, or the novel having it both ways?

Justin, Troy and two kinds of love

1. ★ Justin never hits MJ, never threatens her, cooks her breakfast, boils her water, walks her dog, and takes a bullet for her. MJ says she "shelved her own feelings, her own ideas, her own life really, because Justin took care of everything." Is the novel calling that abuse, incompatibility, or something it deliberately leaves unnamed?
2. MJ blames herself more than Justin: "It wasn't like he'd suddenly changed once they got married ... MJ just buried the warning voice in her head beneath a pile of justification and delusion." Is she being fair to herself?
3. Everyone loves Justin — Toni, Edgar, the nurse, the national press. Only MJ and Claire see something else. What does it cost a person to be the only one who sees it?
4. Julia says interviewing him was "like talking to a pretty picture, not a real person ... a mask of perfection, but underneath there's something else going on." Is Justin hiding something, or is the mask all there is?
5. He calls her "babe" after she tells him twice to stop. Small thing. Why does the book keep putting it in?
6. Set Troy's mentorship beside Justin's care. Troy took MJ under his wing after a disastrous first year and spent twelve years backing her judgment, including when it caused him trouble. What makes one kind of looking-after freeing and the other suffocating?
7. Justin is genuinely heroic at the vigil. Does that change anything about the marriage? Should it?

8. MJ ends the book "PNW partly sunny" — one patch of blue in a sea of gray, counted as a good day. Is that a hopeful ending or a wary one?

West Sound as a place

1. MJ grew up in Las Vegas, "where you could see into the distance for miles." In West Sound the walls of trees are "full of secrets she would never know, even though she passed by them every day." How does that line read once you know what the book is about?
2. The weather is almost a character — rain, fog, the sun disappearing by late afternoon, the brief patches of blue that locals treat as a whole good day. Did the setting work on your mood as you read?
3. West Sound is small enough that the dean of students is the developer's brother-in-law, the fire chief's sister-in-law is the city manager, and the teacher recognizes the bomber's courier from an old yearbook. Is that a plausible small city or a convenient one — and does the difference matter?
4. The water is where MJ goes to stop thinking. The kayak chapter is one of the few quiet stretches in the book. What does that scene do for the pacing, and for her?
5. Edgar "seemed to understand her more than people sometimes did" — company "without having to explain, make conversation, or endure opinions." What would be lost from this novel without the dog?
6. The 1987 Bronco is the one thing MJ asked for in the divorce. By the end it is also the place where her grief finally catches her. How does the book use objects to carry feeling?
7. Garrison's targets are a city council, a developer and a school. His crimes are local in a way a thriller usually is not. Did the small scale make it feel more frightening or less?

How the story is built

1. The novel alternates between MJ and Jefferson, with occasional chapters inside Dylan's head and the killer's. We know Garrison is a man with a plan long before we know his name. Did that build dread, or drain suspense?
2. ★ Chapters 26 and 37 put us inside the killer without identifying him — "He hadn't wanted to kill the kid, but it was part of the plan." Did those interludes feel like a fair contract with the reader, or like withholding?
3. Jefferson is the professional and MJ is the amateur, and the amateur keeps being right — she identifies Dylan, she identifies Garrison at the 7-Eleven, and she is the one who spots that Job and the pumpkin-tie man are the same face. Does the book earn that, or does the police work have to get a little slower for her to shine?
4. Duffel bags recur: Dylan's delivery, the bag at the vigil, and Justin arriving at midnight with a desert camo duffel over his shoulder. Did you notice that last one at the time? What did it do to you?

5. Garrison is caught by Justin, not by the police — and the bomb is carried off by Jefferson. Neither of the book's two investigators actually stops the killer. Is that a satisfying climax?
6. The eighth-grade parent meeting in Chapter Two closes in the final chapter, when Ethan Lawrence pulls his hood down and promises to do better. What does the novel gain by ending on a thirteen-year-old rather than on the case?
7. The attraction between MJ and Jefferson stays almost entirely unspoken — a birthmark noticed, a hand on an arm, a hollow feeling in a hospital corridor. Was that restraint the right choice, or did you want more?
8. Amber Wells runs the investigation, bans swearing, and reads everyone in the room. Which secondary character would you most want more of — Amber, Rory, Claire, Shannon or Carrie Chadwick?

Closing the circle

1. The book opens with an explosion and closes with an armful of yellow roses and a note from Shannon reading "You got this, girl — (this was the kids' idea)." Why end there rather than with the arrest?
2. ★ MJ says she knew "that no amount of time would ever be enough to forget what she and her community had been through." What would recovery even look like for West Sound?
3. Rachel is in treatment and "looks like a completely different person." Jefferson's response is careful: "Not everyone can shake those demons. I hope for the best for her." Whose hope do you share?
4. Troy never appears except in a parent meeting, a text message, a dream and a photograph on an easel. Did he feel fully present to you anyway?
5. If you could ask the author one question about this book, what would it be?
6. MJ expects she and Jefferson will not cross paths again. The series title says otherwise. What do you want from them in *Deadly Deals on the Sound* — and what would you rather the author not do?