

SOME THINGS AREN'T
MEANT TO BE SHARED

followers

a novel

MEGAN ANGELO



Discussion Guide

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1. Marlow's story, in 2051, imagines a gentle extrapolation of the technologies we have now. What do you think future versions of our technology might look like, and how might they impact our lives? Think of other books, movies, or tv shows that imagine a near future. What is different or similar about this one?
2. Marlow lives a life that seems glamorous, but that grants her very few choices. What did you make of the things she takes back for herself—like her sense of smell—and what does it mean to her? How different do you think Marlow's life is from that of current celebrities, especially those who were famous as children?
3. If you had to choose between the incredible fame that Floss, Orla, and Marlow experience—and all the wealth and power it brings—or absolute freedom and privacy, which would you choose?
4. Orla and Floss have a complicated bond. Are they friends, exactly, or something more difficult to define? What did you make of their relationship?
5. Why do you think Honey dresses in and surrounds herself with white?
6. How does being a father affect Aston's character development?
7. Think about the things that Orla and Floss want, respectively. How different do you think they are? How alike?
8. **Followers** raises many questions about privacy in our digital age. What do we give up and what do we gain with devices that make our lives easier? Does easier necessarily mean better? What kinds of choices are we making every day, without even realizing we're making them? What do these choices cost us?
9. Discuss Orla's relationship with her parents, Gayle and Jerry, and to her hometown of Mifflin, Pennsylvania.
10. Marlow is forced to make a terrible choice about her reproductive freedom. Reflect on this choice in light of our current society and the restrictions it places on women's rights.

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AUTHOR Q&A



1. What was your inspiration for this novel?

I was writing in my journal one day, imagining my kids and future grandkids reading it, when I realized that they likely won't be able to. I write in cursive, and most schools are phasing out teaching it. That was where the book began. I thought, what if I wrote something about the future that wasn't quite sci-fi—that felt more about those emotional shifts between generations?

2. What scares you most about the future of technology? What makes you the most optimistic?

Technology provides a reach that lets anyone be very loud if enough people are willing to listen. And I think we're seeing it now: If someone wants to be untruthful, or sinister, technology lets them do that at a high volume. Facts have a hard time competing with that volume. But I'm optimistic about the way people—especially young people—use technology to speak their truths and to organize. And I'm optimistic about the fact that we're still, relatively speaking, at the beginning of all this. It's still shaking out. This is, hopefully, the most disoriented we'll all ever feel on the Internet.

3. Who are your biggest influences as a writer?

Anna Quindlen was gospel in my house—my mom shared her columns and her books with me from an early age. Her work made something click in my brain: *Oh, there are writers whose voices are so distinctive you'd know the sound of them anywhere.* And I think in both her columns and her fiction, she comes at whatever is going on in the world in this literary, character-driven way. She just lives, and she lets her characters live, in certain times and places and classes and families, then she shows us what happens next in vivid, authentic detail.

4. The Marlow/Honey dynamic is a fascinating one. Can you talk about that, and how the current state of American politics may have informed these characters and their antagonism?

I think of Honey as Glenn Beck in Jennifer Lawrence's body. Marlow and the rest of the Constellation talent are logical extrapolations of reality stars like the Kardashians or the Real Housewives—apolitical talent whose everyday lives are their content. Honey is more evangelical. She has a point of view, or at least

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embodies one for profit, and she's honed it by paying attention to who's underserved. She appeals to people with "traditional values"—a code word, in this future, for racism and misogyny—and offers them an alternative to big-government sharing. In the same way I was pushing what we have now on social media and in reality TV when it came to informing Marlow's role, I was pushing cable news and trolls and conspiracy theories when I imagined Honey and the following she would capture.

5. Do you think social media has generally been a detriment or an asset? Do you think that someday there might be serious consequences for opting out of it altogether?

To be honest, I go back and forth on this question all the time. It can be such a powerful tool—you know, something can happen to one person, and they can tweet about it, and then it's retweeted a million times and sometimes real action comes out of that. And beyond its power, social media can be fun and funny and comforting and inspirational. But I don't know—is the bad of it maybe officially winning out when it's the conduit for so much misinformation to spread and hatred to metastasize?

I hope there aren't ever serious consequences for opting out, because we all need to once in a while. I've gone long stretches without social media—the last time I was pregnant, my phone made me nauseous throughout my first trimester—and it's just like sugar; two days of withdrawal and then you don't miss it. (At least for me.) I also think that because I'm thirty-four, it's easier for me to opt in and out. I was pretty well-formed before all this came along. My Instagram isn't really a catalog of my identity. And it's funny—I remember using Facebook as a college student and thinking, "Oh, this is just for college." I never imagined that my *wedding* pictures would be on there one day. I never thought I'd still be using platforms like that when I was in my thirties. I think I'm still expecting a moment to come at some point when it all just... goes away. I think I still believe somewhere in the back of my mind that this is a phase that will end.

6. Would you consider this book a dystopia?

I know it gets dark, but I don't. I think it's reality-adjacent. The book has some depressing moments, but right now there's not a day that goes by that I don't see something more depressing on the news, and it's not just the garden-variety

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



depressing of the world going round, either. There's an outrageous factor to the events of the past few years in America. No matter your politics, I think we're all seeing things we never imagined we'd see. And each day that I sat writing this book—I started it in 2016 and finished it in 2018—the story I was inventing and the stories on the news got closer together. Plus, I think there's an accountability and an ultimate optimism to the book that makes it feel real. Some crazy things happen to these characters, but they're still real people in the real world, and they have to deal with those things in real ways. They go on.

7. Despite their extraordinary circumstances, Floss and Orla have a relationship that feels very real. How did it come together for you, and did it develop the way you'd envisioned when you started? Does the friendship mean something different to Floss and Orla, respectively?

The friendship absolutely means something different to Floss than it does for Orla. There's a part in the book where I say that Floss genuinely believes she and Orla are best friends, but she has no idea what it means to be a best friend. She is incapable of putting someone before herself, and her actions bear that out. Orla, meanwhile, is someone who knows better than to hitch her wagon to Floss, but she simply can't take being lonely anymore. She is someone who simply doesn't have friends, and I wanted to make it clear, because there are plenty of stories where the protagonist just has a best friend—we take that concept for granted. It's very easy to be a perfectly normal and pleasant person and arrive in adulthood without friends—it's all so tenuous! If you grow apart from your high school crowd, and you never really click with anyone in college, or you don't go to college and your friends do, or you move, or work all the time, or get married, or have kids early—it's so easy to miss the friend train. This has always fascinated me. And really, I think it's that—Orla's loneliness—that allowed so many deeply twisted things to happen in this book. Orla only needs one thing from Floss, and that's for Floss to acknowledge she's alive. To see her. Floss can handle that much—and from there on out, Orla's hers.

Their friendship in the book is almost just as I envisioned it in the beginning, except for one thing: People who read early versions of this book urged me to put in more glimpses of Floss's background. You still don't see much. I always intentionally blurred almost everything about her before she shows up in Orla's apartment, because I think that's a common kind of friendship, too: The tornado friend who comes into your life and upends it, who's instantly intimate, who dares you into some of the most dynamic moments of your life, but who remains, in so many

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ways, a total mystery. Now, you see a tiny more of where Floss came from than in the original draft. But not enough that you can put the book down feeling like you knew her inside and out.

8. Like Orla, you also grew up in Pennsylvania. How did that inform your writing of this book?

At first I thought I was putting Orla in the same area I grew up in—Pennsylvania, halfway between Philly and New York—because it was just what I knew. But it became important for a lot of reasons. Just like Orla, I always wanted to move to New York and become a writer—and just like Orla, I think I thought that was the hard part—that if I could just get to New York and get a job at Condé Nast, the rest would fall into place. Well, not to come down too hard on my nineteen-year-old self, because I did work hard, but it wasn't exactly this incredible accomplishment of mine, moving to New York and getting a job at Condé Nast. I only lived 90 miles away. I had parents who could help with the move, physically and financially. I got a job at Condé Nast because I'd been in the internship program at Condé Nast the summer before, and I'd only been able to be in that internship program because, again, my parents could help me financially. (On top of that, they'd paid for me to go to a prestigious college.) So I think Orla and I shared that mid-twenties realization—it's only when you don't get the next thing you want right away that you realize how easy you've had it, and how much privilege you've enjoyed, all along. Pennsylvania became a shorthand for all the things Orla and I share—our geographical roots, our race, our class—and I think it's important to acknowledge.

9. Towards the end of the novel, Floss says something fascinating: “There aren't actually heroes or victims or villains.” Can you reflect on that?

“It's all in the edit.” There's a literal meaning, obviously—I think the way we see Floss and Aston and Orla positioned on *Flosston Public* and on social media is very familiar to anyone who consumes pop culture now. We're used to events and people being manipulated to serve a storyline. And now that instinct to cast people in boxes—right, wrong, hero, villain—has leaked into the news as well. But it applies, too, to how we see people right in front of us. I think I was much more judgmental when I was in my twenties and teens, because I didn't have a lot of experiences yet. Now I think I'm more likely to see gray areas, to acknowledge the complexities of people, and to be a little gentler in my judgments. Of course, when Floss is saying it, she's got another motivation—she's done a lot of bad things to Orla, and she can't face up to her own villainous qualities.

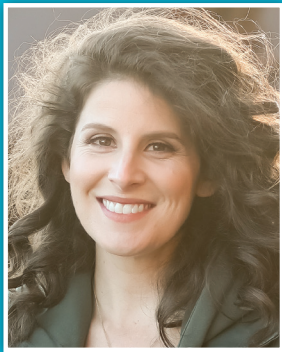
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- 10. One of the subtlest and most chilling things about this book is that Ellis has legal control over Marlow’s eggs. How were you inspired by the current conversation around women’s reproductive rights to weave this into the story?**

The strange thing about this is that I was thinking a lot more about what’s happening with data collection than I was women’s reproductive rights. I was reflecting on the way most of us don’t really freak out about how much data collection is being performed on us daily, and about how little attention we pay to how it’s being done. I’m including myself here. I know this isn’t actually how it happened, but it seemed like one day we assumed we all had privacy online and the next day we found out that every app had everything on us, and it’s almost too daunting to even know how to start fighting back. The eggs, for me, were the right thing for this part of this story because: What could be more invasive than someone else having ownership over your eggs? But if you put yourself in Marlow’s shoes, you can picture it happening, incrementally, with zero drama: You marry Ellis. You sign some papers at the reproductive clinic that you don’t bother looking at carefully. You re-up your network contract and initial a new clause nobody explains. We all do things like this. A thousand clicks on the “OK” buttons of things we don’t have time to read—that’s how we give ourselves away now.



Author **Megan Angelo**, former *Glamour* contributing editor (and writer for publications including *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, the *New York Times*, and *Slate*) knows a thing or two about celebrity—and she has turned it on its head with ***Followers***, her biting debut about the dark things that might await us at the crossroads of technology and our celebrity-obsessed culture. And what better way to memorialize the occasion than alongside a cheeky, Instagrammable cocktail like the author-approved Candy Floss Champagne? Think delightful indulgence, topped with a dollop of audacity—worthy, we think, of ***Followers***' fierce, fame-chasing cast of characters.

CANDY FLOSS CHAMPAGNE

(Recipe adapted from LaurenConrad.com)

INGREDIENTS

cotton candy
(strawberry flavor works well!)

St. Germain liqueur

champagne
or sparkling wine

DIRECTIONS

Place a bit of cotton candy in the glass. Add a splash of St. Germain, and fill to the top with Champagne or sparkling wine. The cotton candy will melt away as you pour over the bubbly!”



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Don't forget to tag your book club—you'll want to share the book, and the drink, with your favorite book-loving friends.

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