

READING GROUP GUIDE

WANT TO GO PRIVATE?



BY SARAH DARER LITTMAN

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KUDOS FOR WANT TO GO PRIVATE?

•**WANT TO GO PRIVATE?** is a bold investigation of a potentially lethal, if common mixture for teen girls: emotional immaturity, technology and emerging sexuality."

~ LA Times

•**Fast paced and very suspenseful! Abby's world feels dangerously real.**

~ Jay Asher, New York Times bestselling author of *Thirteen Reasons Why*

•**A harrowing cautionary tale about the dangers that lurk online...Littman demonstrates how easy it is to fall under the sway of a charming predator.**

~Publishers Weekly

Story Summary

When Abby meets Luke online, she can't believe her luck. He's nice. He's funny. He listens to her and he thinks she's pretty. He even gets jealous of other guys, which is adorable. Without Luke, Abby's not sure how she'd make it through her first year of high school. Everyone, including her mom and her best friend, Faith, tells Abby that if she just made more of an effort, she'd be having fun instead of dreading each and every day as if it's a prison sentence. But there's nothing fun about being the lowest link in the social food chain.

Abby knows she's not supposed to chat with random guys online. But Luke isn't random, and he isn't a stranger. Best of all, he loves her. So what if she never goes out with her friends anymore and her grades are slipping? All she needs is Luke. Luke is her secret, and she's his—it's perfect that way. So when Luke suggests that they meet each other in person, Abby agrees. And then she's gone. Missing. Without a trace. And everyone is left to put together the pieces. If they don't, they'll never see Abby again.

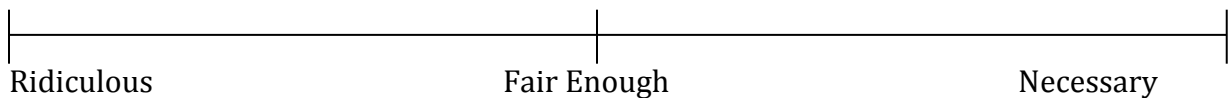
About the Author

Sarah Darer Littman's widely praised first novel, *Confessions of a Closet Catholic*, won the 2006 Sydney Taylor Book Award. She is also the author of *Purge and Life, After*, a 2011 Sydney Taylor Honor Book. In her "grown up" life, Sarah is a columnist for Hearst newspapers and CT News Junkie.com. She lives in Connecticut with her family. Visit her online at: www.sarahdarerlittman.com.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) Have you ever “met” someone online? What was your experience like?

2) What Internet rules does your family have at home? Rate each rule on the following scale:



3) What would you say to a friend who’s connected with someone online and wants to meet him or her in person? Is there a safe way to do this?

4) In Chapter 2, Abby says she can be anyone she wants online since no one really knows who she is. What would you change about yourself in an anonymous situation? What would you keep the same?

5) Abby auditions for the play even though she doesn’t really want to, because she wants to please Faith. Have you ever done something just to please a friend? If you had it to do over again, what would you change?

6) Why do you think Abby finds it so easy to open up to Luke? What would happen if Abby were as honest with the people in her real life, like Faith and her family?

7) Have you ever grown apart from a close friend? What advice would you give Abby about her friendship with Faith?

8) Abby thinks Like’s jealousy of other guys is flattering. Do you agree? Why or why not?

9) In several instances, Abby has niggling doubts about Luke. Why doesn’t she listen to her doubts? Have you ever done something that is against your better judgment?

10) How does Luke convince Abby to do things that she would never normally do?

11) Do you think Abby’s family contributed to her decision to run away with Luke? They feel guilt – are they to blame?

12) Lily is convinced her dad thinks Abby is “the smart one in the family”. Make a list of adjectives you think your parents would use to describe you. Ask your parents to do the same. How do they compare?

13) Do you agree with the advice that Faith’s mom gives about friendship? Why or why not? What are the pros and cons of this way of thinking?

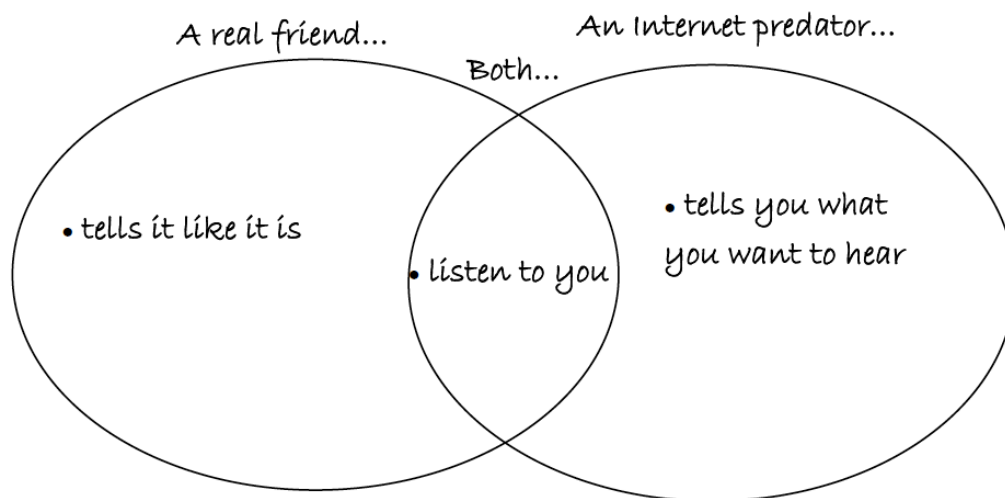
14) As Abby gets dressed in the motel room, she thinks, “Don’t think about Billy. Don’t think about home. Keep this in a box totally separate from everything else.” Why does she do this? Does it help? Have you ever had to block out one thing in order to do another?

15) Abby calls herself “ a dirty, brainless idiot, who’s screwed up everyone’s lives.” Is this a fair assessment?” Why or why not?

16) Abby says, “...the worst part is seeing the reflection of myself in my father’s eyes. That’s worse than any mirror.” Have you ever caused someone you care about deep disappointment? Did you resolve the problem? If so, how? If not, why not?

17) Lily asks her parents, “Would *you* have told *your* parents that you felt like a total loser with not friends?” How would you tell your parents if you were having problems?

18) Using a Venn diagram like the one below, compare behaviors of real friends and an Internet predator like Luke. Use the examples that Abby gives in Chapter 37 and add more of your own.



An Interview with Author Sarah Darer Littman



How did you get the idea for *Want To Go Private*?

I was writing a different book when I heard Supervisory Special Agent Tom Lawler of the FBI's New Haven Office speak about Internet Safety at my son's school two years ago. But I was already extremely aware how many parents are flying blind when it comes to their kids' online activities, and how easy it is for young people to make mistakes that have lasting and far-reaching consequences. After his presentation, SSA Lawler told me about a case in CT where a girl had left with a predator. Fortunately, her mom was a reasonably clued up parent and had the passwords to the girl's accounts, so they were able to figure out what had happened pretty quickly, but even so, by the time the

police rescued her, the predator had almost taken her to the Canadian border. What struck me most – and what inspired me to write *WANT TO GO PRIVATE?* – was her reaction when the police apprehended the predator. It wasn't "Thank heavens you've rescued me", but rather "Don't hurt him!"

As soon as I heard that, I turned to SSA Lawler and said, "That is the book." Kids today have been getting Internet Safety training since elementary school, and this girl's mother was obviously clued up enough to have the passwords to her account, so I imagine there had been discussions in the home. How then, did she travel to the point of "Don't hurt him!"?

Once the idea came to you, what happened next? Did you jot it down right away? Let it simmer?

I kept trying to work on the book I was *supposed* to be writing, but that question ("How did she get to 'Don't hurt him?') wouldn't leave me alone. It nagged me while I was trying write the other book, when I was out grocery shopping, when I was driving the carpool. It just kept nagging me and nagging me until I knew I had to write a book to answer it. I called my agent and asked her if it was okay to abandon

the book I was working on and write this one instead. Fortunately, Jen Rees, my wonderful editor at Scholastic, was very supportive of this book right from the start.

What was the most challenging part of writing this book? The most rewarding?

Without a doubt the hardest part of WTGP was writing a scene of which only fragments appear in the book. One of the comments from Jen, my editor, about the initial draft was that I'd left it too ambiguous - "It's like Abby and Luke just went for a car ride together." I realized that there was a reason for that - I really didn't want to know what had happened to Abby when she was away with Luke.

There are two reasons for this. My daughter was about the same age as Abby when I was writing the book, which made it incredibly difficult to contemplate. But also, as a victim of childhood sexual abuse myself, to face what happened to Abby risked revisiting to some extremely painful places.

How did your own life experiences influence the characters and plot in your novel?

I knew that to write a realistic portrayal of Abby's experience, to be able to write the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder flashbacks that as a sexual abuse victim myself I knew full well she would be experiencing, I had to turn the handle on the motel room door and see what happened to her.

When I first tried writing the scene, I started having terrible nightmares, and had to stop. I kept revising the rest of the book, but then it got to the point where I needed to write it in order to finish my revisions. So one day, while my kids were at school, I told myself, "Okay, this is it. Open that door and face what you see there."

I was shaking when I finished writing the scene. I think part of the reason the book hits people so viscerally is that I was able to draw on my own experiences with abuse to write about Abby's trauma.

Why did you choose to tell the story from different points of view?

Originally, I thought I was going to have to write WTGP in 3rd person, because Abby was going to be missing for part of the book. I wrote 11,000 words and it just wasn't working. It felt flat. Then I had this brainwave about how I could tell the story using a three-part structure in first person with different points of view. I talked to my editor, Jen Rees, about it, and she pointed out that would actually have an added advantage of increasing the tension and suspense, because the reader would only know what the characters know in real time. Once I started rewriting in first person the story came alive, and readers have told me that the switch in point of view at the beginning of Part II is incredibly effective and adds to the shock and anxiety about Abby's safety.

Describe the research you did for this novel.

I wrote to the FBI headquarters in Washington to get permission to work with SSA Lawler at my local FBI office for my research. I had to provide a list of the questions I would be asking him (which required quite a lot of research in advance, because I

had to figure out what questions to ask) and a synopsis of the novel. Once I had that permission, SSA Lawler and MaryBeth Miklos at the New Haven Office were incredibly helpful. I honestly couldn't have written this novel without their assistance. I also was aided by my local police department in Greenwich. In addition to that, my reading list was long and heavy. My daughter said, "You used to have really interesting books on your bedside table but now they're all about pedophiles and creepers."

It was very important to me to try and make the novel as accurate as possible, both in terms of the procedures, but even more importantly, in terms of the emotional truth that all the characters would be experiencing. It was not an easy book to write!

***Want To Go Private?* is your fourth novel. How did your process differ this time around?**

It was definitely the fastest first draft I've ever written – even with the complete rewrite to first person POV after 11,000 words, I completed the first draft in four months. I think this is because my research had given me a very clear idea of where the story needed to go, but also because after having had this story nagging at me for so many months while I was trying to work on another book, I was relieved to be able to get it out.

After I'd written the first draft, I created a very detailed timeline of all the plot points and met with the FBI again. They were amazing – advising me on where my fictional FBI agents wouldn't have had sufficient evidence for a search warrant so that I was able to modify the story to include small points that would lead to Abby's eventual rescue.

One of the other points that came up in my research with the FBI was that for the story to work as I'd envisaged, the servers for my fictional teen site had to be located out of the United States. Very early on, I knew that I had to ensure that I controlled that domain name, so I registered ChezTeen.com as soon as I picked it. I knew that in all likelihood, teens would go check it out (I know I would!) and I wanted to create a site that would help kids think about Internet Safety in conjunction with reading the book.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received?

It was from the incredibly talented and prolific author Jane Yolen – "Get your butt in the chair and write the book."

Ultimately, that's the difference between someone who says they want to be a writer and someone who *is* a writer. The writer actually has the passion, the motivation and the discipline to glue their butt to the chair and write, even when they aren't "inspired" and the words aren't flowing easily.

What advice do you have for young writers?

Read, read, read. Then read some more. It doesn't matter what genre – I recommend reading widely, in many different genres, including non-fiction.

Keep up to date with the news. I'm also a political columnist, and I think that feeds and informs my work as a novelist.

And then get your butt in the chair and write. The more you write, the better you will get.

Above all, be open to the world around you. Ideas can come from anywhere – but you have to be open to receiving them.

When you aren't writing, what are some of your favorite things to do?

I love reading, of course. So many books, so little time! I'm also a big fan of live music. You know that aging rock chick you see at concerts? That's me. I also love to cook – not the everyday “what's for dinner, Mom?” cooking but entertaining for big crowds of friends and family cooking, especially in the summer when I can go snip fresh herbs from my garden.

For information on Sarah and her books, visit sarahdarerlittman.com

Learn more about Internet Safety at WantToGoPrivate.com and ChezTeen.com

This reading group discussion guide was adapted from a comprehensive teaching guide written by Natalie Dias Lorenzi, which can be downloaded as a PDF from the websites above. Visit Natalie's website: nataliediaslorenzi.com.