



On-sale date: March 10, 2015
978-1-58089-583-5 HC \$16.95
Ages 12+ • 288 pages

Tagged

Discussion Guide

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Liam is fourteen years old and dreams of becoming a graffiti writer. He puts up his tag—St. B—all over Minneapolis, where he lives in the projects with his mother and three younger siblings. But Liam’s dreams—and his life—are threatened when Kieran, his estranged older brother, coerces him to tag over a rival gang’s graffiti symbol. Worried that he will turn out like his brother, or worse, his father, Liam’s mother sends him to Lakeshore, Michigan, for the summer to live with her friend Kat.

In spite of himself, Liam is encouraged by Kat’s artistic life as a sculptor and art teacher. Gradually, he delves into the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Pablo Picasso, Claes Oldenburg, and more. Liam begins to consider how his own art might contribute to a greater community. But even in peaceful Lakeshore, a budding graffiti artist can find trouble.

1. Why is the title of the novel significant? Does the meaning change throughout the story?
2. The opening quote by Pablo Picasso says art is “an act of destruction.” What do you think Picasso meant by that? What do you think Liam would say about this quote?
3. There are several instances throughout the story in which Liam expresses his desire to prove he exists. Why is this important to Liam? What does this say about his situation?
4. Why does Liam agree to help Kieran? What are his feelings about his brother?
5. On page 13, why does the owner of the corner market yell at Liam and his siblings on their way to school?
6. Why does the other JFK boy at St. Al’s tell Liam he’s throwing away his chance? What does he mean? Why does he care?
7. Liam is very proud of his neighborhood and gathers a lot of inspiration from where he lives, but his teammates at baseball practice bully him because he is from the projects. How does Liam feel about his life at school versus his life at home?
8. How did you feel when Liam quit the St. Al’s baseball team? Have you ever quit something because you felt like you didn’t belong?
9. Take a look at page 18. Talk about the formatting of the text—what does it mean? How does it reflect the character’s emotional state? What is the significance of this scene following Liam’s meeting with the headmaster?

10. Liam is observant. How does his narrative style reinforce this character trait?
11. As readers we know Liam is a smart kid because we're in his head with him. So why would he be struggling in school?
12. On page 21, Liam describes his mother's eyes as being huge? What do you think that means? What can be assumed about his mother's actions?
13. What is the significance of a tag? Why would Los Crooks be willing to kill Liam because of his tag? Would they be willing to kill him because of his "St. B" tag?
14. Why do you think Liam connects so strongly with Saint Brendan, the Navigator?
15. What is happening when Liam says one thing but thinks another? What does that tell you about Liam's character?
16. On page 27, Liam is hanging out on the roof with his friends Sean and Tyrell when shots ring out in the street below. Sean and Tyrell treat it like a game. What does this tell you about their lives? Does Liam still think it's a game?
17. On page 31, Sean throws up the Irish Mafia hand sign. Do you think he is a gang member, or just playing?
18. Liam has trust issues. What are some instances in the story that reveal this? Who does Liam trust?
19. How do you interpret Liam's response to the Claes Oldenburg quote on page 46?
20. Page 66 is titled "Deciding to waste my life again." What does Liam mean by this? What do you suppose are his reasons for tagging "St. B" in Lakeshore?
21. Why does Liam light a candle for Kieran even though he doesn't want to? Is it for Kieran?
22. Why does Liam open up to Kat about what happened to him at baseball practice?
23. Consider both sides of Sara and Liam's argument about graffiti. Who's right? Do you think that graffiti is an art form or a crime? Why?
24. Liam worries about becoming an artist and losing what it means to be a graffiti writer. How would he define both pursuits? What is the difference that bothers him?
25. On page 98, Liam thinks, "Nobody could ignore Jean-Michel Basquiat." How does this reaction reflect his feelings about himself? Why would Liam feel ignored? What textual evidence makes you believe that?
26. On page 128, Liam notes that the Iraq vets don't look much older than him. How do you think he relates to them? Why do you think it is important that Hank is a veteran?
27. Liam worries that he is Kat's charity case? Is he? Why did she take him in?
28. How do you think the people of Lakeshore's response to Liam's tags show the difference between his two communities? Are there also similarities between the two places?
29. Why does Liam keep tagging Lakeshore even when he knows the townspeople don't like it?
30. What does Liam's first classroom piece, "Trying," on page 148 mean?
31. Liam's first piece is "Street Art: Live from the Hood." What is the significance of these words?
32. Is Liam sabotaging his opportunities with his street art? Did Basquiat?

33. Liam wants to create something amazing and be a great graffiti artist. Does he feel that if his work is not created illegally that it will not be as good?
34. On page 171, what does Liam mean when he thinks, “Need to keep him out of the wreck?”
35. How is the removal of the “St. B” tags symbolic?
36. How do *The Chocolate War* and *The Giver* reflect the themes of *Tagged*? How do they differ? In what ways are these allusions symbolic?
37. Kat says, “New York offered too many opportunities for me to mess up my life.” What do you think she means by that? How is life different in Lakeshore?
38. There are a number of detailed lists throughout the book, for example Liam’s thoughts about St. Al’s, the items on sale at the bakery, and the items in Liam’s artist toolbox. What purpose do you think this literary convention serves? What does it add to the tone of the story? What does it tell you about the protagonist?
39. On page 161, Liam is discussing street art with his art school classmates and how it is sometimes a way to mark territory and sometimes it is a social statement. Does Liam think that the gang tags are the same kind of art as more serious graffiti writers, who tag as an art form?
40. Can a comparison be drawn between *The Chocolate War* and *Tagged*, specifically focusing on Liam’s comment on page 212? (“I like it... Mostly because Jerry did what he thought was right. Even when he knew it could turn out to be awful.”)
41. Why do you think Liam stayed away from gang banging when so many kids from his neighborhood were involved with gangs?
42. Was the academy Liam’s best chance? Was his decision between the academy and returning home right or wrong?
43. When Liam returns to Minneapolis, he thinks, “This is my real life.” Was Lakeshore not a real life for Liam? Is life better for him in Minneapolis?
44. What do you think will happen to Liam when he’s back in Minneapolis?
45. What role do friendships play in *Tagged*?