



Beyond Blonde (the book)

In *Beyond Blonde* sixteen-year-old Sophie Kandinsky's world erupts: Papa leaves home to get sober; Mama retreats within herself; her first love, Luke, is forced to get married; and even her refuge in basketball is threatened. To make matters worse, her own body betrays her at every single turn! Sophie's adored Blondes and audacious aunties are there to help her navigate the cascading catastrophes and shocking secrets with humour and heart.

Set in the 1970s and featuring addictive and vibrant characters, *Beyond Blonde* is the powerful, page-turning conclusion of a highly original series.



Teresa Toten (the author)

Teresa Toten is an award-winning author who was born in Zagreb, Croatia but left for Canada on the same day. Although she's lived in Toronto for most of her life, she's also lived in Delhi (Ontario), Montreal, Ottawa, and New York. Teresa developed her passionate and broad taste in reading as a result of her non-English-speaking mother's habit of filling shopping bags full of books from wildly different sections of the local library. She is the author of *Better Than Blonde* and three other young adult novels including *The Game* and *Me and the Blondes*, which were both short-listed for the Governor General's Award. Her most recent book is *Piece by Piece: Stories About Fitting into Canada*.



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Beyond Blonde

THE DISCUSSION GUIDE

(Grades 7 to 11)

A Study/Discussion Guide for *Beyond Blonde*

DISCUSSION TOPICS

BELONGING

- When we meet Sophie she's at a loss and then she turns to a unique religious blend of Buddhist/Jewish/Catholic practice to help ease her anxiety. How successful is it? What are other ways young people self-soothe or self-medicate?
- Does Sophie finally feel like she belongs? If so, when does that happen? What is a sure-fire way of making yourself feel like you belong? Are there any so-called healthy ways of making yourself feel like you belong?
- Do Sophie's outrageous aunties help or hinder her desirability quotient? How important are they to Sophie's feelings about herself? How important is family (parents, older siblings, etc.) to being cool? Can they help or hurt?

IMMIGRANTS

- It seems that most of Sophie's friends and classmates were born and raised in Canada. Is that true for your classmates? How different is it? How does that alter the mood and tone of your high school compared to Sophie's?
- Sophie and her family, including the aunties, all escaped from Communist countries. What were "Communist countries" and why did one need to escape from them? Are there any modern equivalents?

- Do you think that Canada has become more or less tolerant of immigrants? Does where they come from matter? Are there widely held, but widely wrong, immigrant stereotypes?

ALCOHOLISM

- Sophie's father is an alcoholic, a condition he has battled most of her life, including the time he spent in prison. He leaves his family to help in his quest for sobriety. Was that wise? Why did he feel he had to do that?
- Papa attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings sometimes several times a week. What do you know or think about AA and its sister organizations Narcotics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous? It seems that all the celebrities go to "rehab." What are your views about the merits of one kind of treatment over the other? What works?
- The number of teens in addiction treatment of all kinds has exploded since the seventies. Why is that? Are today's teens just more honest or is binge drinking a real problem? If it is, what has contributed to that?

THE SEVENTIES AND SECRETS

- The author has often stated that none of the Blonde books (*Me and the Blondes*, *Better Than Blonde* and *Beyond Blonde*) would work if they were set in current times. Do you agree or disagree? How important is the time period of the psychedelic seventies? Are these books "historical fiction"?

- How have society's attitudes changed about the following plot points over the decades, including the forties and the seventies, and comparing them to now?

- Adoption
- Teen pregnancy
- Immigrants
- The way teens interact and communicate
- The importance of being cool

CREATE

- Devise your own religion. Borrow elements and practices from established religions or fold in your own original touches. How would it work? Why would it be appealing? How would it be represented in art and architecture? How is it different from established religions?
- Writing romance is hard. If it were up to you how would you alter the Luke/Sophie/David dynamic? Write your ideal ending.
- What has to be a "secret" changes with the decades. What would be important to keep secret today? Write five one-line plot points about seven different characters and their seven different secrets. Then as a response line write why each secret is a secret and whether it will be revealed or not. Do you have a story that can emerge from that?
- Sophie and her Blondes remain fierce friends for life. Create a collage of photos and items that perfectly depict the power and security of ideal friendships.
- Choose one item (clothing, jewellery, photo, etc.) for each major character that you feel best represents that character and explain why you picked it for:
 - Sophie
 - Madison
 - Kit
 - Sarah
 - Mama
 - Papa
 - Auntie Eva
 - Luke and David

Each of the Blonde books were preceded by epigraphs. *Me and the Blondes* had "Tell the truth and run," *Better Than Blonde* had "Secrets are things we give to others to keep for us" and finally, *Beyond Blonde* had "Always tell the truth, even if you have to make it up." Each epigraph distills the essence of what Teresa wanted to say about friendship, secrets and lies. It's also what she thought the Blonde books were about. What do you think they're about?

