



Book Club Guide to

THE PROGRAM

a novel by **Charlie Lovett**

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1. Were you drawn in by the opening scene of *The Program*? What did you learn about Karen from her thoughts and actions in the first scene? Based on that scene only, what sort of person would you say she is? Do you think her view of herself differs from your view of her? How?
 2. The main character of a novel usually undergoes some sort of change during the course of the narrative. How do you think Karen changes? How would you describe her at the end of the novel? How does she overcome obstacles? Do you think the notion of a change of character over a fairly short period of time (in this case a few months) is true to life or only a device of fiction? In what ways has your own character changed through your life? How have the obstacles you encountered shaped that change?
 3. The author has said that one of the things *The Program* is “about” is the ways in which we all present a false façade to the world. In what way does the novel show characters putting on such false façades? One question the book raises (see especially the conversation on pp. 45–47) is where we should draw the line between altering our appearance or behavior as a necessary way to become part of a society (wearing appropriate clothes, for instance) and changing our identity in an unnecessary way because we feel compelled to by societal pressures. Where would you draw the line? When should we listen to our own identity? What have you changed about yourself that you later felt you should have left unaltered? Why did you make the choice to change in that way? How can we help our children understand the difference between necessary and unnecessary conformity?
 4. If *The Program* is at least partially about identity, how do you think Karen would describe her identity? How about David? How would you describe your own identity? How much of your identity is defined by what other people think about you and how much by how you actually think of yourself? How do you think Karen and David would answer that question?
 5. One of the themes of *The Program* is temptation. Discuss the different types of temptation that the characters deal with. What tempts you? Was there a scene in the book in which you would have been especially tempted by a character’s temptation? How do you resist temptation? What happens when you fail to resist? How do you feel?
 6. Why do you think the author includes homelessness as a prominent feature in the novel? In what ways are many of the characters symbolically “homeless”? What does “home” mean? How do they find “homes”? Do you see *The Program* as a novel of two worlds? If so, how might we divide those worlds besides the homeless and the non-homeless? In what ways do you see the real world as divided? How do the residents of the rectory in the third section of the novel see the world as divided? How can such divisions be overcome?
 7. Authors make many basic decisions in creating a novel, all of which have a bearing on the readers’ experience. Consider some of the following decisions and discuss how you think they do or do not shape the novel. How might *The Program* have been different if the author had gone another direction with
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- one or more of these decisions?
- The story is set in New York.
 - The story takes place mostly in winter before and after Christmas.
 - The novel is divided into chapters and into three major sections.
 - The novel is told in the third person.
 - The novel is told mostly in the past tense (you might discuss why the author uses present tense on pp. 75–76).
 - The novel is set primarily over a period of just a few months.
8. In order to keep a reader's interest and build tension throughout a novel, there is generally an increase, as the novel progresses, in what is at stake. How do the stakes rise in *The Program*? What are the stakes at the beginning of the novel? At the end of each of the major sections? At the end? Did this rise in stakes help keep you invested in *The Program*?
9. On page 180 we discover the identity of the person behind The Program. Do you see this character's identity in the book as literal or metaphorical? What do you think is the nature of evil—is it latent within each person, or is it an external force? How do you think the characters in *The Program* would answer this question? How does the novel differ for a reader who takes a literal interpretation of the mastermind behind The Program versus a metaphorical interpretation?
10. Were you expecting the major development at the end of the second section (p. 212)? How does the author let you know that something important was about to happen? What tools does an author have to guide (or fool) the expectations of the reader? How does pacing work in this regard? Are there places in the novel where foreshadowing is used? How does the gap between your expectations and what actually happens affect your experience of the novel?

11. What did you think was the purpose of the inclusion of the film *My Sister, Myself* in the novel (see especially pp. 75–76)? How did the film reflect on the rest of the novel? How is Hollywood portrayed in the novel? If you were casting *My Sister, Myself* with current movie stars, whom would you cast? How about if you were casting *The Program*?
12. What did you think of the ending of *The Program*? Were you satisfied with the way the loose ends were tied up? Would you say in general it was an open or closed ending? Ambiguous or unambiguous? Were some things left unresolved that you would have liked to see resolved or vice versa? What do you think the future will hold for these characters?

Charlie Lovett is Writer-in-Residence at Summit School in Winston-Salem, NC. His plays for children have been seen in over 1,000 productions in all 50 states and five foreign countries.

He is the author of 11 previous books, including works on Lewis Carroll and the acclaimed memoir *Love, Ruth*. *The Program* is his first novel.

More information about Charlie and his works is available at www.charlielovett.com.



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