

A Reading Group Guide to

The Last to Let Go

By Amber Smith

About the Book

The final day of sophomore year promises to bring the much anticipated freedom Brooke Winters has been hoping for, until the unimaginable happens and her mother is arrested for the death of Brooke's abusive father. Helpless against a judicial system that might spare their mother, Allison, and prevent the children from being left alone in the world, Brooke and her siblings—older brother, Aaron, and younger sister, Callie—try to make sense of their world. The heartbreaking struggle affects each of them in different ways, with significant consequences. Brooke is intent on clinging to the truth as she believes it: her mother will be released from prison, and their family will finally be free from the violent life they've always known. Brooke follows a downward spiral of denial, delusion, and self-deception as she hides the truth from herself and from those who care about her most. Only when Brooke learns to believe in herself and to understand the parameters of love does the courage to hang on become the courage to let go. This deeply compelling novel explores the internal psychological and emotional journeys of children jeopardized by domestic violence, and the heart and mind's potential for positive change.

Discussion Questions

1. Brooke's first-person narrative affects how we experience her as a character and how we witness other characters and events. Do you find her relatable? What would be lost in a third-person omniscient narration?
2. How does the way Brooke relates to her siblings, her mother, and Jackie reveal something about her? Do you sympathize with Brooke?
3. Brooke wonders "if fish can miss the sea, even if they've never lived there. If something instinctual tells them *This isn't real, this isn't what life is supposed to be like.*" What is significant about this passage? What does Brooke believe her life is supposed to be like?
4. It's difficult to assist someone who refuses to ask for help or admit they've been abused. Jackie tells Brooke, "I couldn't help her because she couldn't deal with the fact that she *needed* help. I've managed to stop blaming myself over the years." What are the far-reaching consequences of this loss of connection between Jackie and Allison?
5. What role does Dr. Greenberg play in Callie's recovery? What role does Jackie play? How does being in Dr. Greenberg's office initially affect Brooke? How does this change over time? When invited to live with Jackie and Ray, Brooke tells Aaron, "I know I should feel safe and secure but it's the complete opposite." What does Brooke mean by this? What problems does this present?

6. Why is Brooke so reluctant to share her feelings and her family story of abuse with Dani, instead using lies and excuses to cover up the truth? What effect does this have on their relationship? How important are honesty and mutual trust to Dani? To Brooke? How important are they to you?

7. Any repeated unhealthy behavior can become abusive. What were the early signs of abuse between Brooke and Dani? Do you think personal secrets are sometimes necessary? At what point do personal secrets become deceptive, and when does deception become abusive?

8. Compare Allison's and Brooke's natures. What is at the heart of the way they each relate to the world? In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different? Consider Allison's treatment of Brooke, and Brooke's treatment of Dani. Do these actions have the same effect on Brooke as they do on Dani?

9. In addition to the theme of domestic abuse and violence, the author gives voice to issues of revenge, injustice, lying, self-deception, the delicate nature of friendship, and the vulnerability of the human spirit. What are some of the other themes, issues, and concerns addressed in the novel? Which ones are most important to you?

10. Considering secondary or peripheral characters, whom do you relate to most? For what reasons? What effect did this character have on the three siblings? What effect did this character have on you?

11. Relationship abuse and domestic violence can be physical, psychological, and/or emotional, and can cross lines of ethnicity, religious beliefs, social class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and age with profound, long-lasting effects. Why might people not always leave abusive relationships? Why didn't Caroline and Allison end their relationships before the abuse escalated?

12. What behaviors do you look for in a dating partner? In a friend? What behaviors make you feel safe in a relationship? What behaviors make you feel unsafe? What are your nonnegotiables in a relationship? What qualities do you bring to a relationship?

13. Why do you think Brooke responds so positively to Caroline? What aspects of Caroline's personality help Brooke find confidence and trust in herself and others? Do you believe people can change if they want to?

14. How does Caroline's story help Brooke better understand her mother? How does it help Brooke better understand herself?

15. Books, music, movies, TV shows, and social media send powerful messages to young adults about relationships. What beliefs do they tend to promote? How do young people in your community learn about healthy or unhealthy relationships?

16. Boys and men who are victims of abuse often don't receive the support and resources they need. Why do you think this is? Where did Aaron turn to find the understanding and care he needed? What had he learned about himself? Could he have found his path to healing without leaving?

17. Caroline left Brooke with the message, "Caroline. Just in case." Do you have a trusted relationship with at least one responsible friend or family member "just in case?" Who is it? If not, who might you ask?

18. How did reading *The Last to Let Go* affect you? Which aspects of the story were most relatable to you? Which aspects inspired you? Which aspects were the most disheartening?

19. What realizations allow Brooke to feel safe enough to start over, to begin again—to let go?

20. Was the ending satisfying to you? What do you think might have to happen for Aaron, Brooke, and Callie to break free from the cycle of abuse and damaging legacy of domestic violence that is so often passed down through the generations?

Extension Activities

1. Occam's Razor is a problem-solving principle that suggests the more assumptions you have to make, the more unlikely an explanation is. All things being equal, the simplest explanation is usually the best one. Research some practical applications of this principle.

2. Become familiar with and uphold the [Relationship Rights](http://www.loveisrespect.org) featured on loveisrespect's website, www.loveisrespect.org. This is a set of rights that can help set respectable boundaries in a relationship.

3. Consider becoming a loveisrespect peer advocate. loveisrespect National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline was launched in February 8, 2007, by the National Domestic Violence Hotline and Break the Cycle. This 24-hour national web-based and telephone resource center was created to help teens and young adults experiencing dating abuse, and is the only helpline in the country serving all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. In addition to the telephone hotline, there is a text feature and live chat option that allows teens to connect to trained peer advocates via the web. The loveisrespect peer advocates are trained to offer crisis intervention, advocacy, and information and referrals. The Office on Violence Against Women of the United States Department of Justice supported the launch of the helpline.

4. Become familiar with available services in your community working to stop domestic violence, including your local nonprofit Coalition Against Domestic Violence. The coalition works in partnership with direct service providers, government officials, and business and community partners to promote equality in relationships and alter the social conditions that allow violence and abuse to occur.

5. For some people, compulsive lying is an easy way to respond; for them, telling the truth is more uncomfortable than lying. This pattern usually develops in early childhood when raised in

an environment where lying is necessary. Research the characteristics of pathological, habitual, and chronic lying and the effects of lying and deception on relationships. There is much online, but a good place to begin would be: 5 Signs of Lying - Paul Ekman Group, LLC at www.paulekman.com/facial-expressions/signs-of-lying/

6. American psychologist Martin Seligman initiated research on learned helplessness in 1967. Learned helplessness occurs when a person endures repeatedly painful or aversive circumstances, believes himself or herself to be helpless, has accepted that he or she has lost control, and thus gives up trying. Learned helplessness theory is the view that clinical depression and related mental illnesses may result from such real or perceived absence of control over the outcome of a situation. For research into learned helplessness and its prevalence in relationship abuse and domestic violence, begin with a website such as [Seligman's Theory of Learned Helplessness and Long-Term Depression](#).

7. In a 2016 paper by researchers from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, the authors suggest self-deception is more than an “anomaly in human behavior” and hypothesize it will be the next scientific frontier that psychologists take on. In order to understand Brooke’s propensity for self-deception, read Sarah Sloat’s article, “[Why We Lie to Ourselves](#)” at <https://www.inverse.com>, as well as the many other supporting articles found online.

This guide was prepared in 2017 by Judith Clifton, M.Ed, MS, Educational and Youth Literature Consultant, Chatham, MA.

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