ABOUT THE BOOK

Nora Lopez is seventeen during the infamous New York summer of 1977, when the city is besieged by arson, a massive blackout, and a serial killer named Son of Sam, who shoots young people on the streets. Nora’s family life isn’t going so well, either: her bullying brother, Hector, is growing more threatening by the day, her mother is helpless and falling behind on the rent, and her father calls only on holidays. All Nora wants is to turn eighteen and be on her own. And while there is a cute new guy who started working with her at the deli, is dating even worth the risk when the killer likes picking off couples who stay out too late? Award-winning author Meg Medina transports us to a time when New York seemed balanced on a knife-edge, with tempers and temperatures running high, to share the story of a young woman who discovers that the greatest dangers are often closer than we like to admit — and the hardest to accept.

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). The questions can also be used as writing prompts for independent work.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. “I tell a thousand little lies about my life every day so I can feel like a normal person,” says Nora (page 205). What do you think is the biggest lie that Nora tells? Why does she tell it?

2. Kathleen MacInerney has been Nora’s best friend since kindergarten, yet Nora decides “there’s just no way she would understand how Mima, Hector, and I work” (page 155). Why does Nora believe this? Do you? Why or why not?

3. Feminism was on the rise in 1977. What opportunities did the movement offer young woman like Nora and Kathleen? What did it mean to older women like Stiller and Mrs. MacInerney? Why were some women, like Mima, appalled by it?

4. “You think we suck as feminists?” Kathleen asks Nora at a women’s rights rally (page 78). “We do argue about Wella Balsam versus Prell.” What do you think is the difference between a good feminist and a bad one? Does worrying about hair care (or getting dressed up for boys) undermine Kathleen’s and Nora’s commitments to the cause?

5. Nora has a troubled relationship with both of her parents, but they aren’t the only grown-ups in her life. Who are the other important adults? How do they support her? Why?

6. Why is Nora attracted to carpentry? What makes her so good at it?

7. In what ways is 1977 very different from our own time? In what ways is it similar?

8. Almost forty years have passed since 1977. Try to imagine where the main characters of Burn Baby Burn are now. What do you think has become of Nora, Kathleen, and Pablo? Where is Hector?

9. Papi dotes on his youngest son, but is largely absent from the lives of his two oldest children. Whom do you blame for his behavior? Why? How does Nora finally transform her relationship with her father?

10. “Men are reckless,” Mimi tells her daughter (page 31). “They’re born that way, impulsive, but eventually they find a good woman and outgrow it.” Are boys more reckless than girls? Why does Mimi demand more from her daughter than from her son? Would Hector be better off if she didn’t? Would Nora?
11. How did a paunchy mail clerk terrorize an enormous metropolis like New York City? What were Son of Sam’s most chilling tactics?

12. *Burn Baby Burn* is both a love story and a horror story. What is your favorite romantic scene? Which scene is the scariest? Why?

13. Pablo is handsome, kind, and smart. Why does Nora keep pushing him away?

14. “Sometimes it’s easier to let people think I’m Greek or Italian,” Nora says (page 115). Why does she sometimes feel the need to hide her ethnicity? What does being a Latina mean to Nora? What does it mean to her mother?

15. “Remember to reach,” Nora’s guidance counselor tells her on the last day of school (page 215). “You’ll surprise yourself.” What does Nora ultimately reach for? How is she surprised?

16. “Burn Baby Burn” is what Nora and Kathleen write on the beach at Breezy Point at the end of this novel. What is the significance of that phrase to the two friends? What makes it such a fitting title for this book?

17. “I wrote this story,” Meg Medina writes in her Author’s Note (page 306), “because young people everywhere sometimes find that they have to fuel their hope against a bleak backdrop and outpourings of rage.” How does Nora fuel her hope? How have other young people in difficult situations, either in your community or elsewhere, fueled theirs?

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### About Meg Medina

Meg Medina won the Pura Belpré Author Award for her novel *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* and the Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award for her first picture book, *Tía Isa Wants a Car*. She writes for young readers of all ages. Her work examines how cultures intersect, as seen through the eyes of young people, and speaks both to the qualities of Latino culture that are unique and those that are universal.

Born and raised in Queens, New York, Ms. Medina was thirteen years old in 1977, the year this novel is set. She now lives with her family in Richmond, Virginia, where she also works on community projects that support girls, Latino youth, and literacy. In 2014, she was recognized as one of CNN’s Ten Visionary Women in America.
One morning before school, some girl tells Piddy Sanchez that Yaqui Delgado hates her and wants to kick her ass. Piddy doesn’t even know who Yaqui is, never mind what she’s done to piss her off. Word is that Yaqui thinks Piddy is stuck-up, shakes her stuff when she walks, and isn’t Latin enough with her white skin, good grades, and no accent. And Yaqui isn’t kidding around, so Piddy better watch her back. At first Piddy is more concerned with trying to find out more about the father she’s never met and how to balance honors courses with her weekend job at the neighborhood hair salon. But as the harassment escalates, avoiding Yaqui and her gang starts to take over Piddy’s life. Is there any way for Piddy to survive without closing herself off or running away? In an all-too-realistic novel, Meg Medina portrays a sympathetic heroine who is forced to decide who she really is.