

## **One Two Three Discussion Questions**

**From LaurieFrankel.net**

1. At the beginning of the novel, Mirabel says, “Teenage girls don’t get enough credit for this, their ability to see the potential import of everything, no matter how insignificant it seems, and analyze it endlessly. It’s written off—we’re written off—as silly, but it’s the opposite” (p. 7). Why do you think the author has chosen teenage girls to narrate? Why three of them?
2. Mab spends the novel determined to leave Bourne for somewhere better, which she thinks is anywhere. But Pooh says, “There’s a lot that’s really nice about this town. We’re not especially wonderful maybe, but we’re not especially miserable either. How it is here is how it is everywhere” (pp. 165–66). How usual or unusual is Bourne? In what ways has Bourne suffered, and in what ways does it actually seem like a pretty good place to live—for anyone and for its residents in particular? Regardless of where you’re brought up or what you have or don’t have, do you always think the grass is greener somewhere else? Did you when you were sixteen?
3. Monday has what she calls “witchlike librarian magic to pick the right book for you.” She says librarians “listen to what you need and want and think of a way to help you which sometimes is by ignoring what you need and want” (p. 40). Why does she go to such lengths to maintain the town library in her home? Why does the novel give Monday the job of librarian? What role do libraries and librarians play in communities like Bourne and in communities like your own?
4. At some point, nearly everyone in this novel tells Nora it’s time to move on from the legal battle she’s been waging for sixteen years. When Omar calls her “the town crazy lady,” she asks, in the face of all that’s happened, whether it’s “crazier to demand some kind of restitution, even though restitution is impossible, or to pretend all is well and everything’s fine when nothing is or will be ever again?” (p. 157). Does Nora’s commitment to the lawsuit seem foolhardy or necessary or something else altogether? What would be the most appropriate response to what’s happened to Bourne?
5. Nora’s lawyer, Russell Russo, appears in Bourne only online or in flashback, but his presence runs deep throughout the story. When his baby is born with Down syndrome (p. 180–81), many things change for him and his relationship with Nora, with Bourne, and with the lawsuit. What is the significance of Russell’s child having Down syndrome?
6. Mirabel says, “There are two kinds of people in this world. People who can expect to, strive to, feel entitled to be happy. And people who cannot.... Look through history for the latter. Look around your town or city. You will find us everywhere.... Some people are unhappy and that’s okay with us” (p. 147). Who cannot expect to be happy in this novel, and with whom is that okay? Is she right that there are people where you live of whom the same is true?
7. Zach says, “Only rich people get to stand on principle” (p. 228). Do you agree? What stops people in this book from doing what’s right or even what they believe is right? When do these characters have to compromise their principles and why?

8. Mab feels sorry for River because, unlike her and her sisters, he doesn't seem loved or prioritized by his parents (p. 235). Mirabel says, "It occurs to me for the first time: there are some ways, some crucial, breathtaking, shattering ways, in which Nathan Templeton's lot is far unluckier than mine" (p. 291). In what ways are the Mitchells in fact luckier than the Templetons?
9. Toward the end of the book, Mirabel expresses anger and frustration with everyone in Bourne, including and especially her mother. When Nora assures Mirabel she loves her exactly the way she is, Mirabel replies, "That is not enough" (p. 358). Why is accepting and loving people as they are not enough? What are Mirabel's (or anyone's) needs beyond being cared for and embraced by her mother, sisters, and community?
10. Two of the three sisters separately make the same catastrophic error in judgment towards the end of the book, and it costs them—and everyone—dearly. Why does each do it? How does each betray the other? Are they both equally forgivable and forgiven, or do you blame one more than the other?
11. Belsum Chemical and its CEO Duke Templeton are clearly the villains of this story, but, as Mab observes, the rest of the Templetons "are becoming less evil by the moment" (p. 309). How are River, Nathan, and Apple each responsible for and complicit in what's happened and what's happening in Bourne, and how are they each better than their parents? How does each try to redeem himself or herself by the end of the book? Do any of them succeed?
12. The novel opens with Mab's homework assignment to write about how "history and memory are unreliable narrators, especially in Bourne" (p. 1). Mrs. Shriver reminds her of this toward the end. (p. 348). What do these words mean, and why are they especially true in Bourne? At the very end of the book, Mirabel says she will keep writing because "I have voice to give we voiceless few" (p. 397). How unreliable and how important are memory, history, storytelling, and witness in this novel?
13. At the beginning of the novel's last chapter, Mirabel objects to the fact that stories like Bourne's are always compared to David and Goliath. "In fact," she argues, "I think it is a metaphor perpetuated by the Goliaths themselves" (p. 377). Why does she hate this comparison? Why does she think it better serves the Goliaths of the world? Do you agree with her?
14. The sisters narrate this novel in turns, and each sister takes her turn to play a part only she can play in the events at the very end of the book. What does each sister contribute? What does each learn over the course of the story? Who's your favorite?
15. The girls eventually conclude, "It's not our mother—our mothers, the last generation—who can fix this. They can't. It is up to us now, the daughters, to move our town forward, to save us all, to tell a different story. Her way was lawyers and injunctions and lawsuits and the bounds of

the system. Ours will be something else” (p. 380). Why the faith in daughters in particular? How is the next generation more and differently equipped to fight injustice?

16. Throughout the book, each sister has misconceptions about the world outside their small town, and each worries that she can't fit into it. Are they right to consider themselves not normal? If so, how are their differences challenges, and how are they in fact strengths?

17. Many of the residents of Bourne have disabilities of some kind. In fact, more do than do not. How does disability change when it's the majority culture? How can our own communities be more accessible, accommodating, and adaptive? What can we learn from Bourne?

18. Monday complains that *Lord of the Flies* “won an award for showing that boys are mean and badly behaved, even somewhere nice like the beach. This seems like something anyone in the entire world who has ever met a boy could tell you, but they gave William Golding a Nobel Prize for it.” Her teacher informs her the book is actually about “the unraveling of civilization” (p. 16). How is Monday's own civilization unraveling, and how is ours? How is the way she and her sisters respond more effective than boys in classic literature? What are some ways we can respond more like the Mitchell sisters do to the injustices in our own lives and communities?

19. Which systems in or related to Bourne work in its citizens' favor, and which work against them and how? Think government, corporate, media, community, education, infrastructure, health care, voting, and religious systems. How do these same systems work for and against the citizens in your own community?

20. The author has said she thinks of this novel as a companion to her previous one, *This Is How It Always Is*. For those of you who have read that earlier book, how does this one have similar ideas about family, wider definitions of normal, and living as a minority in the majority culture? How does this book also describe something that seems very unusual but is, in other ways, how it always is? How are your town and your life and the people you know like the ones presented in *One Two Three*?