



# Commissioner's Book Club: Lullabies for Little Criminals

## Discussion guide

### Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

### Author Bio

Heather O'Neill is a novelist, short-story writer and essayist. Her most recent bestselling novel, *The Lonely Hearts Hotel*, won the Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction and was longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction and CBC's Canada Reads. Her previous work, which includes *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* and *Daydreams of Angels*, has been shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, the Orange Prize for Fiction and the Scotiabank Giller Prize two years in a row. She has won CBC's Canada Reads and the Danuta Gleed Award. Born and raised in Montreal, O'Neill lives there with her daughter.<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

*Lullabies for Little Criminals* introduces the reader to Baby, who is growing up in Montreal. Her father, Jules, is a heroin addict, and from the ages of 11 to 13, Baby navigates instability and complicated relationships that lead her into a dangerous

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<sup>1</sup> [Harper Collins Canada 2024](#)

dynamic with a manipulative adult who exploits her vulnerability. Despite the harsh and isolating circumstances, the story captures Baby's enduring hope, bright curiosity, resilience and search for love and belonging.

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*We added Lullabies for Little Criminals by Heather O'Neill to the human rights book club reading list because it sheds light on the often-invisible struggles of children growing up in poverty and prompts important discussions about child welfare, social services and the rights and responsibilities we all hold. Through Baby's experiences, the reader is invited to consider themes of addiction, exploitation, care and the impact of systemic failures on vulnerable populations.*

*One of the inadvertent themes of this book club—which only emerged once we had selected these books—is the complexity of love in the face of trauma. In this book, the relationship between this child and her single father (who is essentially still a child himself) will break your heart. Our stereotypes about drug users and neglectful parents can use this dose of complexity and heartbreak so we can better imagine what the role of the state (or child protection services in particular) might be in families. Poverty and its many tendrils that weave through girlhood, power, family, trauma and escape are beautifully and devastatingly illustrated in this book.*

- Commissioner Govender

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## Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Human rights are the idea that we deserve certain things just because we are human. Everyone is born with the right to a life of equality, dignity and respect.

Human rights are a way of meeting our responsibilities to each other. They help us treat each other fairly and show us what it means to respect each other.

Many human rights are protected by law. These laws tell us how governments must treat people and how organizations and people must treat each other.

British Columbia's ***Human Rights Code*** is a provincial law designed to safeguard individuals from discrimination in areas such as employment, housing and services. It protects against discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as race, color, ancestry, ethnicity, Indigeneity, religion, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, family status and physical and mental disability.



While individuals experiencing poverty may face discrimination related to their family status, disability or other protected grounds, it is important to note that poverty, in and of itself, is not a protected characteristic under the Code.

## Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. How does the title reflect the story's themes?
  - a. The juxtaposition of innocence and exploitation.
2. What does Baby's name symbolize in the context of the story? Does that meaning change over time?
  - a. The innocence and dependence of a baby; a baby's need for care and vulnerability—in contrast with the realities of her context.
3. What role do systems (health care, education, the justice system and more) play in the lives of characters in the novel?
  - a. Under the *Human Rights Code*, equal access is meant to be ensured for housing, employment and services (including education, health care and social services).
  - b. At different times, in different contexts—protective, controlling, limiting and punitive
4. How does Heather O'Neill present addiction and mental health concerns as both a personal and systemic issue? How does this reflect stories from your own experience or experiences of those you care about?
  - a. Jules: mental health and addictions supports, personal struggle and inadequate support systems
5. Reflect on the ways in which poverty is overlooked or judged in the novel. Do you see poverty as a human rights issue? Do you think it makes any difference if it is or not?
  - a. Xavier's family's judgement, Baby's limited possessions and clothing.
  - b. Stable and safe housing and nutritious food. Opportunity to study and enjoy school.

Systemic discrimination builds a world of injustice and inequity. This means that systemic discrimination leads to the world being unfair. Take two minutes to watch this video on [Systemic Discrimination](#) before jumping into the next questions.





6. The video says that systemic discrimination “benefits some, and harms others.” The word “harm” is often used to describe when a person’s body is hurt. What other meanings could harm have?
  - a. Emotional harm, exclusion, punishment, denial of access, loss of an opportunity, detainment, harassment.
7. What examples of unfairness or injustice did you see in *Lullabies for Little Criminals*?
  - a. Baby’s school classroom assignments. Many references to healthy and enough food. Access to safety.

The report “[Paige’s Story: Abuse, Indifference and a Young Life Discarded](#)” from B.C.’s [Representative for Children and Youth](#) tells the story of Paige, a 19-year-old Indigenous woman who died of a drug overdose in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. From a young age, Paige moved between shelters, foster homes and unsafe housing while being exposed to violence, neglect and substance abuse. Despite 30 child protection reports and frequent crises, including struggles with her health and addiction, Paige was repeatedly failed by the systems meant to protect her.

8. Both Baby and Paige interact with institutions like schools, housing, social services and law enforcement. How did stereotypes, biases about groups or systemic discrimination influence the treatment of Paige and Baby by these institutions?
  - a. Paige: Indigeneity, substance use, poverty, more
  - b. Baby: Substance use, mental health, poverty, more
9. In what ways does Baby’s desire for belonging drive her actions and decisions?
  - a. The theme of escape (physical and emotional) overlaps with a deep yearning for connection that repeatedly leads her into harm. Her experience of neglect makes her more vulnerable to exploitation, though



over the course of the story, she learns to differentiate between real care and manipulation.

10. What does the ending suggest about Baby's future? What do you hope for her future?
- a. It leaves room for hope—suggesting she may find more safety and stability.

## Further reading and prompts

If you'd like to dig deeper into local human rights issues, we suggest reading BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner's [Rights in focus: Lived realities in B.C.](#) report that highlights key human rights issues in British Columbia and focuses on ten major areas of inequity, including housing, social safety nets, education, employment, health, public spaces, criminal justice, family life, child welfare and the environmental crisis. The report calls for action to address these disparities and improve the human rights landscape in the province.

11. Does Baby's experience with poverty reflect the challenges faced by children in B.C. due to gaps in the [social safety net](#)? In what ways is it different?
- a. The social safety net in B.C. fails to provide adequate support for marginalized communities, leaving individuals vulnerable to poverty, housing insecurity and food insecurity. This systemic gap disproportionately affects low-income families, people with disabilities, and Indigenous communities, where the assistance provided is often insufficient to meet basic needs.
12. In what ways does Baby's search for stability in *Lullabies for Little Criminals* mirror the systems for [children in care](#) in B.C.?
- a. B.C.'s child welfare system is marked by significant inequities. Systemic biases, a lack of culturally appropriate services, and overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care highlight the challenges faced and need for equitable access to support services for vulnerable children and youth.
13. How does Baby's experience of housing insecurity reflect the struggles marginalized groups face in accessing safe, affordable [housing](#) in B.C.?
- a. Housing affordability remains a major issue in B.C., with marginalized groups, particularly Indigenous peoples and low-income families, facing significant barriers to stable housing. The report points out the shortage of affordable housing options, discrimination in rental markets and the displacement of vulnerable populations, exacerbating social and economic inequalities.

