1. The Mason girls are the central metaphor of *American Girls*. How much did you know about the Manson girls before reading this novel? About Charles Manson? Did you think about them differently after you finished the book?

2. Roger is the first character to see a parallel between Anna and the other “lost girls” of California: “All of those girls were children of America, reckless children. Heartless children. Cruel children who hated their parents.” In what ways does Anna fit or not fit that description? Are there times when you have felt lost or reckless?

3. When Anna visits Sharon Tate’s grave with Jeremy, she writes down “the names of the dead, which, like the gravestones themselves, could be lost all too easily in the clutter around them.” Why do you think the victims are so much easier to forget than the murderers? Can you think of a recent example of this from the news? Do you think, as a culture, that we glorify violence?

4. Do you think Anna was justified in stealing her mom’s credit card and running away to Los Angeles?

5. When Anna is talking about the Manson murders with Dex, she worries that she “sounded like a dumb, bougie suburbanite, so white that it had bleached my brain.” In what way does Anna’s background inform how she looks at the murders? What does she overlook?

6. When talking about the Manson family, Anna says that “the story was better than the stinky, hungry truth. It’s not like that would have been a first.” This might also apply to Olivia Taylor, whose public persona is so different from the girl Anna meets. Have you ever met one of your heroes? Was it exciting or disappointing?

7. When Roger is filming Delia after her nose is broken, he puts up a wall of pictures, some of the Manson girls, some of girls from the present. Anna describes them as “creepier than any slasher film, smile after smile of hopeful faces, faces beautiful enough to be easily loved, unloved enough to be easily fooled. For the first time in my life I was glad that I didn’t look like that, that I wasn’t the kind of pretty that turned a girl into prey.” Do you think that Delia’s broken nose changes her for better
or for worse? What does beauty mean to the various girls in this novel? To the Manson girls?

8. When Anna is talking to Roger about Roman Polanski, she asks him, “Why do you think it is that Roman Polanski does this awful thing and doesn’t even feel sorry about it but he gets to live his life? And you have these women . . . and they never get to spend one day not paying for it, even though most of them have spent the rest of their lives trying to do something to, I don’t know, atone?” How would you answer that question? Do you think gender is part of the answer? Is fame?

9. Most of the parents in this novel are absent—literally and emotionally. How do you think that parental behavior affects children, specifically Anna and Olivia? Can you relate?

10. How did the story about Olivia’s father change your understanding of her as a character? Why do you think it reminds Anna of Squeaky Fromme and her father? If you wrote a note to America, how would it read?

11. When Jeremy and Anna spend their last night together, he tells her that “everyone spends their lives wanting to be like us, and thinking this is it. The big dream. But the real trick is just learning to be regular.” How does this quote apply to the other characters in the story? What is the line between chasing your dream, and learning to like the life you have? Do you think that resisting a “normal” life makes people unhappy? Do you think as a culture, we put too much emphasis on fame?

12. When Anna finally writes her paper on the flight home, she claims that “Los Angeles was like Gatsby’s dream of Daisy, but for all of America. Instead of sitting on a pier and gazing at a green light across the water, now people just sat in their living rooms and watched the wide-screen 3-D version of some life that was out there for the taking, if only they could get off the couch.” What do you think of when you think of Los Angeles? Do you think that dreaming about life gets in the way of really living it? Do things like television and social media make life more or less real?

13. The violence of the Manson murders was real and tangible, whereas much of the violence in Anna’s life is emotional. Do you think emotional violence can be as damaging? Is it more confusing for being invisible? Where do you see Anna being hurt, and hurting others in this novel? How does Anna’s treatment of Paige Parker make her similar to or different from a Manson girl? Do you think Anna has changed by the time she flies back home?

14. The title of this book is American Girls. Do you think the stories of the girls in this book are particular to America? Do you see any parallels to your own life?