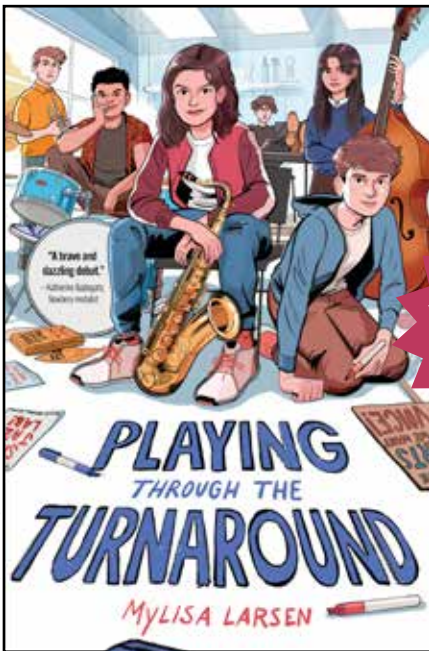


# PLAYING THROUGH THE TURNAROUND

by Mylisa Larsen



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**BOOK TALK**

For the five eighth-graders in Jazz Lab with Mr. Lewis, the class is the best thing in their lives. No matter how hard things are at home, “It’s a good day whenever it’s Jazz Lab day.” They improvise, learn to listen, and burn up the room with their playing. So when they find out that Mr. Lewis has mysteriously left and that the school board wants to cut classes like music, art, and shop, the Jazz Lab kids decide to fight back. With more and more students joining the cause, the five musicians and an outsider named Quagmire plan a protest so big that the adults might finally listen. As they make music and make waves together, their friendships—and some romantic feelings—grow stronger. Can eighth graders get adults to pay attention and change? Readers will stand up and root for them all the way to the heart-thumping finale.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### LISTENING

“YOU, DON’T LISTEN TO US” (p. 180). That’s what the Jazz Lab students and Quag put on the backdrop for the concert. The list is long of adults who don’t listen. Describe the School Board meeting and why the students felt ignored. Which of the Jazz Lab kids feel their parents don’t pay attention to who they really are? Give specific examples where parents and Principal Deming don’t listen. How does listening tie into Lily’s decision to shave her head? Talk about Lily’s thoughts on pp. 76-77 about being heard. How is listening an important part of playing jazz together?

### ACTIVISM AND TEAMWORK

In the theater, Quag sees a sign with the “pathetically cheerful slogan *TEAM: Together Everyone Achieves More*” (p. 83). Yet how do he and the Jazz Lab kids find this to be true when it comes to protesting about school cuts? How does their petition bring other students into the cause? What makes the student council members join in? Discuss Mac’s conversation with his sister about his decision to break rules. Was the plan to disrupt the school concert justifiable? When the Jazz Lab kids are called to the office for their punishment, why do many other students go with them?

### NOT JUST TEST SCORES

The school board is focused on student test scores but many students find classes and extracurricular activities even more important than core courses. Which teachers seem to understand the students’ point of view? What are some of the classes and activities that students at the school value besides Jazz Lab? Why do those activities matter? What does Mac

learn about classes and activities that were cut in recent years? Why is Jazz Lab so important to the five students? Give examples that show the power of music for individuals and for larger groups.

### FRIENDSHIP

How do lunch tables reflect friendship in the novel? Why do kids wonder why Lily would “get to be” Cassie’s best friend (p. 9)? How did they become friends? Why does Lily think Cassie needs her? What shows that Nick is now friends with Jake and Mac? Why does it matter so much to him? Describe Nick and Quag’s relationship and how it changes. Why does Jake think, “Being friends with Quag has its definite downsides” (p. 91)? What are some of the upsides for Jake and the others in being friends with Quag? Why doesn’t Quag have other friends?

### TRUST & SAFETY

Talk about the role of trust in the novel. Trust is a big issue for Cassie because, as Lily bluntly says to her, “Your dad lies” (p. 171). What promises does Cassie’s father break? How does it affect Cassie’s life and how she feels? Why do you think he does it? Why does Lily associate trust in her own life with safety and jumping into water? Why does Jazz Lab sometimes feel like the “sunny dock” from her childhood (p. 33)? In what way does she feel she can’t trust her father anymore? Relate the keys that Quag takes to the topic of trust.

