

# Book Club Guide

Including a letter from author Charlie Lovett, a Q&A with Charlie Lovett, suggested questions for discussion, and additional resources for your book club meeting or personal reflection.

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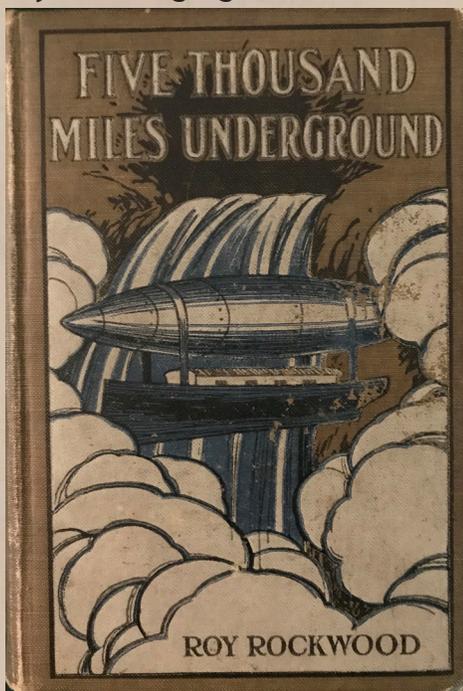


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## Dear Readers,

Nearly five years ago, during sleepless nights while recovering from surgery, I lay thinking about what I would like to write next. I had written a novel about Shakespeare, one about Jane Austen, and another inspired by King Arthur. But Shakespeare and Jane Austen and King Arthur are not the books that first got me excited about books. For me that honor went to the *Hardy Boys* and for many of my contemporaries similar series like *Nancy Drew* and *Tom Swift* first piqued their interest in reading. Yet the influence of these series had never, to my knowledge, been explored in a novel.

As an antiquarian bookseller in the 1980s I had learned the true story of how the *Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, and scores of other series for children were written. I knew that the authors of those two most famous series, Franklin W. Dixon and Carolyn Keene, didn't really exist. Might this publishing history become art of a novel? While my copies of the *Hardy Boys* mystery had long ago vanished from my shelf, I did have three books that belonged to my grandfather when he was a boy, the first three volumes of the *Great Marvel* series. Like the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*, the *Great Marvel* books were created by Edward Stratemeyer. I pulled down a copy of one of them and examined the copyright page. New York, 1906 it said.



Charlie's grandfather's copy of *Five Thousand Miles Underground*, the third

volume of the *Great Marvel* series. Like the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew*, the *Great Marvel* books were created by Edward Stratemeyer. I pulled down a copy of one of them and examined the copyright page. New York, 1906 it said.

That simple imprint led me down a rabbit hole of research into that city and that time period. I wanted to write about early children's series books, the people who wrote them, and the amazing city in which some of those people lived. I wanted to incorporate long forgotten historical events that deserved to be remembered. And I wanted to frame it all with the quest of a twenty-first century author with his own demons to exorcise.

I have loved spending time with Magda, Tom, and Gene, my three historical heroes, in the New York of the early twentieth century. It was a time when so much seemed possible, yet it had restrictions that my characters pushed back against at every turn. And I've loved helping my contemporary hero, Robert, deal with his past and the special place that children's series books held for him.

The *Hardy Boys* was part of my childhood and I imagine that those books or some similar children's series, may have been a part of yours. In *Escaping Dreamland* I wanted to explore a city, create characters that readers could enjoy spending time with, and above all tap into those stories of our childhood and see how they can connect us with the past and with each other.

Happy Reading,  
Charlie Lovett

# Q&A with CHARLIE LOVETT author of ESCAPING DREAMLAND



**Q:** What was the process of researching *Escaping Dreamland* like?

**A:** The New York City of 1906 is no longer there. While individual buildings or places like the Flatiron Building or Bow Bridge in Central Park remain, most of 1906 New York was swept away long ago. History books helped a little, but not much, because I wanted to know about how people lived their everyday lives. How did they work, travel, eat, shop, and entertain themselves? Newspaper archives helped a lot. I even borrowed some passages from contemporary newspapers when describing some of the events of the time. I also made use of digital archives at the New York Public Library and New York Historical Society. Here I found amazing atlases of the city, transport maps, directories, photographs, postcards, and even menus. I am so impressed at the job that libraries have done preserving the records of ordinary lives. The people, places, and events that didn't make it into the history books (and those include some stunning events) have always been the ones that fascinated me as a historical novelist.

**Q:** How did you go about creating the children's series that Magda, Tom and Gene write?

**A:** I started by reading as much as I could about the series books of the early twentieth century (and of course reading some of the books themselves). There were rules to these books—formulas and patterns required by the publishing syndicate that created them—so I knew Magda, Tom, and Gene would have to start out working within those rules. I also looked for concepts that hadn't been used in one of those series of the time. So I gave Magda a circus performer, which I hadn't seen in other series, and made Gene's character a "girl inventor." That pushed the bounds of what might be found in 1906 children's books, which I liked. One of the most fun parts of writing the novel was creating the excerpts from the various fictional children's books—copying the overblown prose style of the originals.

**Q:** Why did you want the Dreamland amusement park to be so central to the story?

**A:** Dreamland symbolized so many things for me. First it stood for freedom—here are three characters who have been fighting against societal strictures in Manhattan, but in Dreamland many of those strictures are relaxed and they are more able to be themselves. The park also seemed to reflect the great optimism of the age. It was modelled after the "White City" of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and lit up with a million light bulbs after dark, so the place fairly shimmered with light that proclaimed, "Look what we can do!" And finally, Dreamland, sadly, symbolized the evanescence of happiness. Opened in 1904, it only lasted until 1911. Add to all that the fun of researching and recreating in prose the rides and attractions and it was easy to see that Dreamland needed to be the site of the pivotal scenes in the novel.

**Q:** Is the character of Robert Parrish based on you?

**A:** I don't base characters on existing people however, I do create them out of what I observe about human nature in others and in myself, so inevitably a part of me is in every character. The tragedy of my childhood was not a secret—my mother died when I was two years old. But, looking back on my experience with that loss, I see that I reacted, at least in part, as Robert did—first with suppression and denial, and then by writing about it (my 1999 memoir, *Love, Ruth*). I also share with Robert a trepidation about that question, “What are your favorite books.” Yes, I have read and love Dickens, but I've never read Tolstoy or Hemingway or some of the other authors that an established author is supposed spout back as an answer to that question. My other point of convergence with Robert didn't happen until after the book was written. A few months before publication date, my father passed away and, again, part of my grieving process has been writing about him. I feel for Robert's loss in a way that I couldn't when I wrote about it. It's made me learn that even when a book is finished, it evolves in our minds as our own experiences cast fresh light upon the story and characters.



Charlie's photograph of Bow Bridge, Robert Parrish's favorite spot in Central Park and the site of the beginning of the first Alice Gold novel.

# Suggested Questions for Discussion



- 1) The author has said that early on in his writing process he sensed that one of the themes in *Escaping Dreamland* would be identity. How does the author explore the issue of identity and the ways in which we do, and don't, act in accordance with our own sense of who we are?
- 2) Gene feels that he cannot be his most authentic self around the people he loves the most. In what ways have you had to hide yourself amongst loved ones? How does this feeling of having to act contrary to one's true self play out in the other characters, including Robert?
- 3) *Escaping Dreamland* raises the questions of what it means to be an American and what it means to be a New Yorker. How does the novel (and how do you) answer these questions?
- 4) In her rush to fit in as an American, Magda turns her back on her own community. In what ways, if any, have you abandoned your own people in a desire to fit in among others? How does this decision change Magda?
- 5) Although the book was written before the Covid pandemic, it feels prescient that Gene dies in the flu pandemic of 1918. But the author is also referencing the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. In what ways does Gene's character presage the gay community in New York seventy-five years later?
- 6) *Escaping Dreamland* can be seen as a novel about how we move on with our lives after tragedy. How do each of the four main characters deal with tragedy? Who handles tragedy in the healthiest way?
- 7) Magda understands that her life is shaped by her past, but she refuses to allow her life to be ruled by her past. How does *Escaping Dreamland* deal with the place of the past in our lives? What do you think is the proper balance between embracing your past and freeing yourself from it?
- 8) *Escaping Dreamland* also draws attention to the ways that a city can change over time—even one that has been untouched by war for a couple of hundred years. How should a city or a nation deal with its own past? What is the right balance between progress and historic preservation?
- 9) Robert is haunted by a secret in his past. Have you ever felt the same? How have you dealt with guilt for past events that cannot be changed? Compare how Robert deals with the burden of his past with how Magda handles her burden.

10) Tom may illustrate that privilege doesn't necessarily equal happiness. What do you think are the necessary elements of happiness? How has Magda used those in her own life to achieve happiness in spite of tragedy?

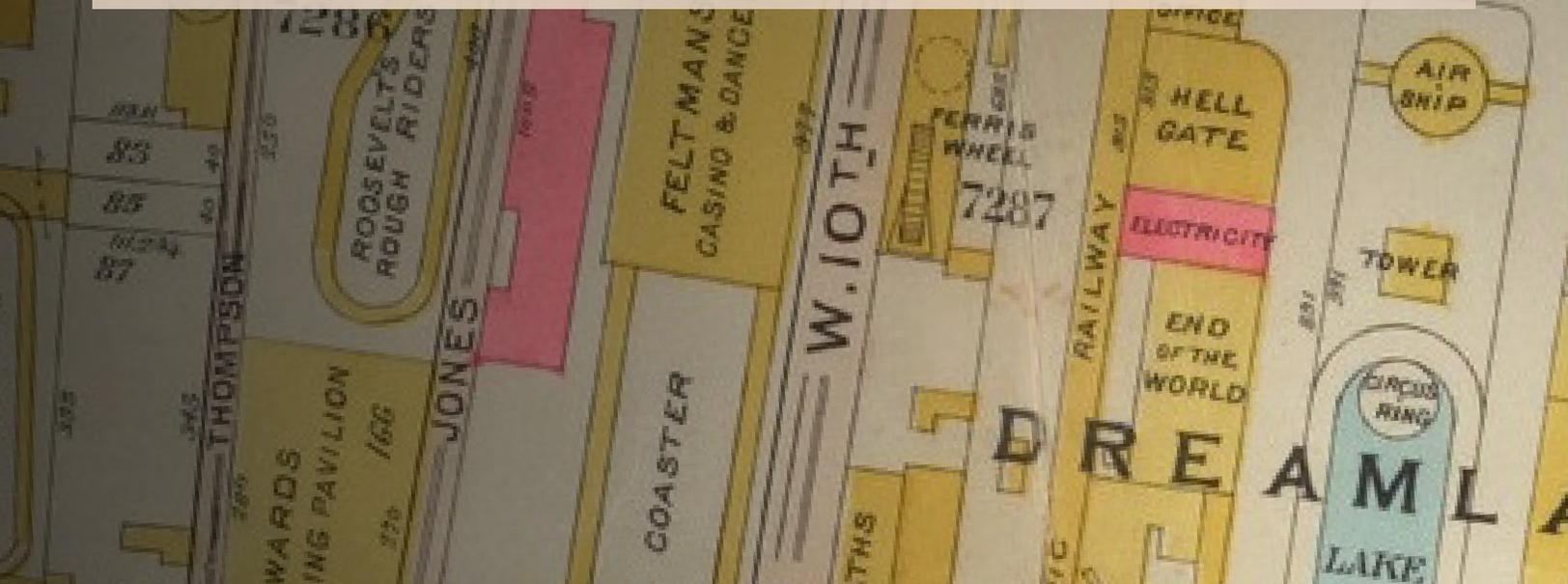
11) What books from your childhood have stayed with you? How did your childhood reading shape your reading life? What books first got you excited about reading?

12) Robert is bothered by the racism in the books he liked as a child. How should we treat works of art we have loved in the past when we discover moral flaws within them? Can we separate a text from the society in which it was created?

13) The author has said that the final sentence of the book was originally about forty pages from the end, but it kept calling out to him and he realized he wanted it to end the book. Do you think this sentence is particularly apt for the ending of *Escaping Dreamland*? Why or why not?



Original ticket for passage on the Iron Steamboat and admission to Dreamland for the 1906 season.



# Further Reading & Resources



[Click here](#) to watch videos created by Charlie discussing different aspects of the novel and its setting on the Blackstone Publishing YouTube channel.

[Click here](#) to listen to a special episode (#67) of Charlie's podcast *Inside the Writer's Studio* with Charlie in discussion with Modern Mrs. Darcy Anne Bogel about *Escaping Dreamland*.

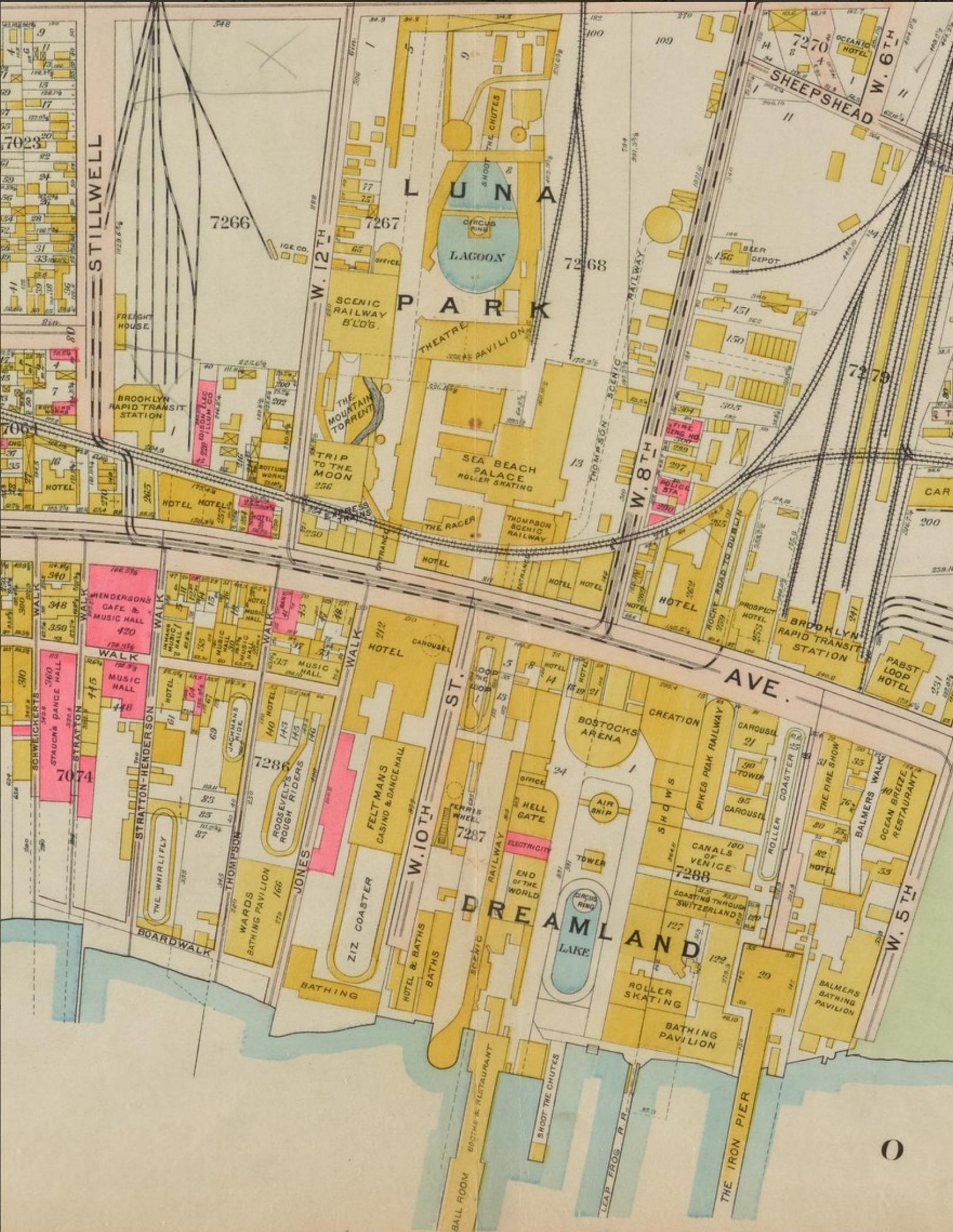
[Click here](#) to read the complete text of the first volume in the *Great Marvel* series, *Through the Air to the North Pole*, by "Roy Rockwood" (a.k.a Howard Garis).

[Click here](#) to see a Menu from Child's Restaurant digitized by the New York Public Library.

[Click here](#) to read about the history of Dreamland at the *Heart of Coney Island* website.



A postcard of the Dreamland amusement park on Coney Island. This image became the basis of the cover of *Escaping Dreamland*.



STILLWELL

LUNA PARK

DREAMLAND

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W. 8TH

W. 10TH

W. 5TH

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RESTAURANT

BROOKLYN RAPID TRANSIT STATION

BROOKLYN RAPID TRANSIT STATION

THE WHIRLIFY

BOARDWALK

HOTEL & BATHS

ROLLER SKATING

BATHING PAVILION

BALMERS BATHING PAVILION

SEA BEACH PALACE ROLLER SKATING

THE RACER

HOTEL

FIRE ENG. NO. 297

POLICE STA. 300

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