



### ***Influenced***

By Sarah Darer Littman and Cindy L. Otis

HC: 9781339038261 • \$19.99

EB: 9781546110736 • \$19.99

Also available in audio

Ages 12 & Up • Grades 7 & Up

On sale 8/19/2025

# INFLUENCED

BY SARAH DARER LITTMAN  
AND CINDY L. OTIS

## The Story

Tenth grade isn't going according to plan for Lainey. Her twin brother moved across the country to live with their dad and stepmom, leaving Lainey—and her anxiety—behind. And Lainey's starting to realize that maybe most of her friends were really her brother's friends. Thank god for Bliss.

Bliss is navigating her own tough sophomore year, determined to find her place. But no matter what's going on in her life, Bliss is really good about being there for Lainey. She's confident and fearless, all the things that Lainey wishes she could be. It seems like Bliss is getting everything she's ever wanted, including a new boyfriend and becoming the first wheelchair user to land a lead role in the school production.

What no one knows is that Bliss is struggling. At school it feels like everyone is always watching her, and at home, she's overwhelmed by her parents' expectations. When things get worse for Bliss, she goes MIA. Panicked that something awful has happened, Lainey rushes to find out what's going on. But when Lainey arrives at Bliss's apartment, nothing is what it seems, and everything Lainey thought she knew about her friend is a lie . . .

## Reading Group Questions

1. Who did you identify with more: Bliss or Lainey? Explain why, thinking about their personalities as well their choices and actions over the course of the book.
2. Lainey and Bliss are both dealing with tensions with their friends and not all their friendships are positive. What are some ways their experiences are different? Are there ways their experiences overlap? How are friendships built? What makes for a good friend versus a bad friend?
3. How does social media change the opportunities and boundaries of friendship? What are the pros and cons of online friends? Does social media bring us closer or just give us the illusion of being closer to other people?
4. Lainey and Bliss each feel the pressure to perform: Lainey from her dad and the elephant, who demand, "Why can't you be even the slightest bit normal?" and Bliss from her parents and followers who want her online persona to be the "friendly neighborhood disabled girl." What are some ways those pressures manifest for the characters? What might you suggest to help Lainey and/or Bliss deal with them?

## Reading Group Questions (Continued)

5. Bliss talks about her experiences with hopecore, which is a “whole side of social media that serves up nothing but inspiring videos” (p. 109). Were you aware of hopecore before reading *Influenced*? How can it perpetuate stereotypes about disabilities? What are some ways to combat that?
6. What was your reaction to the reveal about Bliss and Lainey’s friendship? Was it something you saw coming? Should Lainey have known all along? Was Lainey justified in feeling betrayed and confused? Was Bliss right to feel threatened and afraid? Why?

## About the Authors



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**Sarah Darer Littman** is the Sydney Taylor Honor author of *Some Kind of Hate*; *Backlash*; *Want to Go Private?*; *Deepfake*; *Anything But Okay*; *In Case You Missed It*; *Life, After, and Purge*. She is also an award-winning columnist and teaches writing at

Western Connecticut State University and with the Yale Writers’ Workshop. Sarah lives in Connecticut in a house that never seems to have enough bookshelves. You can visit her online at [sarahdarerlittman.com](http://sarahdarerlittman.com).



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**Cindy L. Otis** is the author of the YA novel *At the Speed of Lies* and the nonfiction book *True or False: A CIA Analyst’s Guide to Spotting Fake News*. She is a former CIA officer and a national security expert. Her work on global technology issues

has been frequently cited by media outlets, such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the BBC, NPR, and CNN. You can visit her online at [cindyotis.com](http://cindyotis.com).

## Authors Q&A

**You two are both authors in your own right. What made you want to write a book together?**

**CLO:** Quite fittingly, we first connected through social media after discovering each other’s books shared common themes about the impact of social media and technology on the human experience. We developed a friendship around our shared interests and became publishing cheerleaders for each other.

**SDL:** We each knew we wanted to co-write a book one day, but that it would take a special kind of person with whom to partner. Then one day Cindy threw out the idea of us co-writing a book together. We were both working on other manuscripts but kept talking about what that project could look like, and *Influenced* came out of those conversations..

**How did you go about writing the book? What was the process?**

**SDL:** We spent a week together in person outlining the novel and writing our first chapters, but then we were apart for the rest of the process. We both were on different publishing deadlines for our individual novels that never quite matched up, so when I was writing Lainey, Cindy was revising her other novel, and vice versa.

**CLO:** That meant that we had to carefully outline our plans and intentions for each of our characters so the other one could hit the right beats. We had regular check in phone calls and long text discussions to work out tricky plot points during the initial drafting and many subsequent revisions.

**Writing with a friend must be challenging. What was the hardest part of the book to write? What was the most fun part?**

**CLO:** One of the hardest parts of writing the book was nailing the lead up to the big twist, and figuring out where in the narrative it should happen. We wanted readers to be surprised, but also to understand that we had left clues along the way that, in hindsight, made sense. Individually, we each had our own specific challenges.

## Authors Q&A (Continued)

**SDL:** Right. For instance, Cindy had to think about “Bliss” as almost three separate characters and write their stories accordingly—the Bliss as presented initially to the reader, and then Elizabeth before, and Elizabeth after. For me, it was about discovering what made Lainey so vulnerable to an unhealthy parasocial relationship.

**CLO:** The most fun part of writing the book was in the beginning when we had the idea, but were really just starting to figure out the journeys each character would go on and how we could weave those together. The start of a story is always a combination of exciting and scary because you have nothing but possibility ahead. Then comes the hard work of actually writing the book and revising it!

### What would you love for a reader to understand more after reading this book?

**SDL:** It’s certainly possible to “meet” people online who become friends in real life—we are proof of that! But it’s important to remember that on social media we only see a small, curated portion of people’s lives, and that portion should not be used as any sort of measuring stick to compare your own life.

**CLO:** Something we do think about is how social media and parasocial relationships can impact our ability to make friendships and be present with the people in our offline lives. To some extent we also share Shula’s skepticism about the relationship between social media, consumption, and the long-term effects on the environment and our understanding of the world. But like Mia, we also appreciate how it can help build communities and grow friendships.