

Keep in Touch: Letters, Notes, and More from the Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants Study Guide

Keep in Touch: Letters, Notes, and More from the Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Random House

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Plot Summary

Keep in Touch: Letters, Notes, and More from The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, by Ann Brashares, is a companion piece to the author's book *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. The book has no plot of its own, but rather is a collection of notes, letters, and other items that the original book's four major characters have written to each other during the course of their lifelong friendship. Much of what happens in *Keep in Touch* is vague and somewhat confusing because the author assumes that the reader is familiar with the original book.

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants follows four teenage girls - Lena, Carmen, Bridget, and Tibby - who have been close friends all of their lives. During their 16th summer, they are separated for the first time when Lena goes to visit her grandparents in Greece; Bridget goes to soccer camp in California; Carmen goes to visit her father in South Carolina; and Tibby stays at home in Bethesda, Maryland. Shortly before the summer begins, the girls buy a pair of jeans that magically fits all of them perfectly despite the fact that they are very different shapes and sizes. While they are apart, they ship the pants back and forth among them, along with letters and notes keeping each other up to date on what is happening during a very eventful summer that changes each of their lives.

Keep in Touch traces the girls' history back to their childhoods through the inclusion of birthday party invitations and notes that show the reader how their personalities were shaped from an early age. Bridget is very focused on sports; Lena loves art; Tibby is very bright and articulate; and Carmen is a "girly girl" who is deeply affected by her parents' divorce.

Tibby's notes and other writings reveal that she is unhappy about being stuck in Bethesda, working at Wallman's discount store, and babysitting her younger siblings. She meets a younger girl named Bailey, whose presence is annoying at first until they become close friends. As the summer progresses, Bailey becomes very ill, is hospitalized, and apparently dies, although the exact circumstances are unclear in this book.

Carmen's excitement at spending the summer with her father in Charleston, South Carolina turns to dismay when he reveals that he is getting married. Carmen takes an instant dislike to her soon-to-be-stepmother, Lydia, and her children, Krista and Paul, primarily because she resents their intrusion into her relationship with her father. By the end of the book, it is not clear whether or not she resolves her anger toward her father and his new family.

Bridget's summer gets off to a good start, but seems to go awry because of resentment toward her parents, who apparently pay little attention to her. She becomes interested in one of her coaches, Eric, and the book hints at a sexual experience going awry. There are also signs that Bridget is experiencing some serious psychological problems, but the exact nature of these problems is never made clear.



Lena has the best summer experience. She loves Greece and is happy to have so many beautiful places and objects to draw and paint. She also meets a boy named Kostos and falls in love with him. Shortly before returning home, she overcomes her fear of revealing her feelings to him.

The book ends with a section advising readers, who are presumably teenage girls, on various ways to keep in touch with their own friends through written communications such as e-mail, instant messaging, and handwritten letters.



Introduction

Introduction Summary

Keep in Touch: Letters, Notes, and More from the Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, by Ann Brashares, is a short companion piece to the author's earlier novel The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants. In the original novel, four close friends - Carmen, Bridget, Lena, and Tibby - are apart for the first time in their lives when the activities they undertake during their 16th summer force them to scatter far and wide. Before the summer begins, they discover that despite the fact that they are of very different sizes and body types, there is one pair of jeans that fits each of them perfectly. During the summer, they ship the "traveling pants" back and forth as a means of staying in touch, sharing their experiences and taking advantage of the pants' magical powers to make good things happen.

The book's introduction, which is narrated by Carmen, sets up the rest of the book. The reader learns that the four girls have been inseparable all their lives, since their mothers met in a pre-natal aerobics class the summer before they were born. During their 16th summer, Bridget (also called Bee) goes to soccer camp in Baja, California, Lena goes to Santorini, Greece to visit her grandparents, Carmen goes to South Carolina to visit her father (her parents have been divorced since she was small) and Tibby, whose real name is Tabitha, stays at home in Bethesda, Maryland, where she works at Wallman's discount store. Carmen's introduction notes that they "go through some things" during the course of the summer, but since they have no cell phones, they stay in touch through letters that they write when they mail the pants to each other.

In addition to those letters, Carmen says that the book contains older notes and cards from earlier years, along with a final chapter on how readers can stay in touch with their own friends through notes and letters.

Introduction Analysis

The book's introduction identifies the four main characters and the circumstances that cause them to spend their 16th summer apart. Since this is a companion piece to the author's novel The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, the book assumes that the reader is thoroughly familiar with that book, so few details are given. The author hints that the summer will contain a great deal of drama for each of the girls, but doesn't reveal more than that.

Again assuming that the reader is familiar with the original book, the history of the traveling pants is not provided here. The narrator, Carmen, simply notes that the pants are the fabric that holds their friendship together, and it is implied but not specifically stated that the girls mail them back and forth among the four of them, along with letters designed to catch each other up on their lives.

The introduction also indicates that the reader will gain some background on each of the girls through birthday cards and other notes written earlier in their lives.



Pages 7 through 26

Pages 7 through 26 Summary

The section spanning pages 7 through 26 takes the girls and their friendship through age 11. It begins with a key to the symbols used to identify which notes are written by or refer to which girls. Carmen's symbol is a flower, Lena's is a heart, Bridget's is a star, Tibby's is an asterick, and a shamrock is used to denote when something includes all four girls.

The beginning of their relationship is shown through a roster from the pre-natal aerobics class in which their mothers met. There is also a note from Bridget wishing Carmen a happy 6th birthday, followed by the invitation to each girl's 11th birthday party. The reader learns that Carmen's parents have divorced at this point through a note in which she tells about her delight at spending a day with her father and how much she wishes she could see him more often. At about the same age, Tibby writes a note, presumably to her parents or a music teacher, making a case for why she should not be forced to play the piccolo anymore, and the notes from a game the girls played at a slumber party when they were 9 provides early glimpses into their personalities and interests.

The section concludes with each girl's Christmas wish list the year they were 11, a class assignment in which Tibby is asked to write a biography on a royal family. She writes about her favorite rock musicians because she considers them to be royalty, and a list of the names Bridget would choose for a band.

Pages 7 through 26 Analysis

In this section of the book, the interests and personalities of each girl are already being shaped and revealed through simple things like birthday party themes and notes. Lena's interest in art is already evident by age 8 when her friends are invited to celebrate her birthday by painting ceramics. In a slumber party game, she reveals that her favorite subject is art and that her favorite pastime is drawing and her Christmas list starts with watercolor pencils. She also appears to be a kind, gentle person who wishes for peace on earth and is taken aback by the thought of kissing a boy.

Tibby is interested in music, movies, going online, and absorbing pop culture in general. Her intelligence is evident by the impressive vocabulary and sentence structure that she uses in her note asking to be released from playing the piccolo. Even though she loves music, she doesn't want to be forced to play an instrument that she doesn't like.

Bridget's love of sports is evident from her swimming-themed birthday party and her wish to be on the Olympic soccer team. She also has a strong, forceful personality, shown by her bold handwriting and frequent use of exclamation points. Her Christmas list is almost all sports-related except for the surprising request for a Holiday Barbie, showing that she has another side to her personality.



Carmen is already being influenced by her parents' divorce. In addition to her wistful wish that she could spend more time with her father, her Christmas list is split into one list for her mother and a separate one for her father, and the list for her dad includes spending time with him at the place of his choice. Carmen is also a bit obsessed with food, describing in detail what she and her father ate, as well as girly things, as evidenced by her spa-themed birthday party and Christmas list dominated by clothing, lip gloss, and perfume. The items on her list foreshadow an event to come later when her future stepmother plans a pre-wedding spa day.

The importance of the traveling pants is foreshadowed in this section when the final item on each girl's Christmas list is jeans and each of the four icons denoting each girl is clearly symbolic of her distinct personality and interests.



Pages 27 through 39

Pages 27 through 39 Summary

The section spanning pages 27 through 39 takes the girls from age 12 up until the beginning of their 16th summer. It begins with a lengthy instant message from Carmen to Tibby, chastising her for not showing up for Carmen's Halloween party. The girls had agreed to dress as characters from the Wizard of Oz, and Tibby's failure to come made them look foolish because they had no Cowardly Lion. Carmen is especially upset because Tibby didn't call to say she wasn't coming, and a friend said she saw Tibby at another person's party. Tibby writes back and explains that her mother trimmed her lion's mane too much and she was too embarrassed to come, and Carmen forgives her immediately.

Another note from Tibby To Carmen, written at age 14, conveys her unhappiness and horror that her parents are having another baby, and a lengthy note from Carmen to Tibby rambles about a boy she likes, while Tibby's reply is short and to the point.

Carmen writes to all her friends about several ideas she has for a novel since it's National Novel Writing Month, and the girls write back giving their opinions about her ideas. The reader also learns about the girls' Valentines Day gifts to each other — handmade cards from Carmen, a book from Tibby, pink carnations from Lena, and chocolate lollipops from Bridget. In the section's final note, her soccer team conveys condolences to Bridget over a death in her family, but the author does not reveal the identity of the person.

Pages 27 through 39 Analysis

The fact that Keep in Touch is a companion piece to another book is clear in this section when Bridget receives a note of condolence, but the reader does not know the identity of the person who died. Presumably this is clear to those who have read the original book.

Again the girls' personalities are revealed through their notes to each other. Carmen is wordy, writing long, detailed notes about a variety of things, while the others' replies are short and to the point. Carmen seems to be the only one obsessed with boys at this point. Her vivid imagination is evident by the creative topics that she's developed for her potential novel.

Tibby has the strongest social conscience; she suggests that Carmen change her main character from a male to a female and emphasizes the word "person" over a gender-specific word, while Lena, who wants to get along with everyone, thinks all Carmen's ideas are great and Bridget responds with a sarcastic but friendly remark. Bridget's sarcasm also comes into play when she comments on what TV shows she'd give up,

naming programs that she clearly doesn't watch. The last entry in the section implies that she is coping with a loss in her family characteristically by running.



Pages 40 through 59

Pages 40 through 59 Summary

The section starting on page 40 marks the beginning of the girls' 16th summer — the summer they'll spend apart. It starts with a note from Lena's art teacher telling her parents that she's a talented artist, followed by an excerpt from Tibby's Wallman's application giving the answer the hirer would want to hear along with her real feelings about her lack of passion for the job she's applying for. Carmen contributes a list of things she plans to do while she's visiting her father in Charleston, SC, including everything from food she hopes to eat to her plans to get a tan. Lena is preparing for her trip to Greece and asks each of her friends what they'd like her to bring back for them, and Tibby's mother leaves her with a to-do list that includes picking up diapers, loading the dishwasher and doing laundry. The section also includes a brief excerpt from a short story Carmen has written, along with a notation saying she takes it to South Carolina to show her father, but never takes it out of its folder. Tibby contributes a review of several movies, most of which have a common theme of keeping in touch with friends, along with a description of her feelings about staying in Bethesda for the summer, and Bridget writes separate postcards to her mom and dad from soccer camp, at least one of which she apparently does not intend to mail.

As the section closes, some of the girls are beginning to run into trouble during their summer adventures. Carmen writes a letter telling her friends that her father has announced that he's getting remarried and she is not happy about it at all. Lena tells her friends that the pants have not brought her the luck she expected. Instead, she nearly drowned while wearing them and was rescued out of the water by a fisherman.

Pages 40 through 59 Analysis

The girls' individual interests and personalities continue to be revealed through the notes contained in pages 40 through 59. Carmen is portrayed as the most well-rounded of the group. Her to-do list for her time in Charleston includes her passion for food, movies, sightseeing, and girly things, and her hope that something earth-shattering happens to her foreshadows the revelation that her father is getting remarried, which shatters her world. This is also somewhat foreshadowed in the notation saying that Carmen takes her short story to South Carolina to show her father, but never actually does so, leaving the reader to wonder what prevented her from showing it to him as she'd planned.

Tibby's mother's to-do list reinforces the fact that she is having the least exciting summer when her mom asks her to pick up diapers and do household chores while her friends are having adventures in faraway places.



Lena brings the girls back to their childhoods with her note about National Watermelon Day and a reminder of the way Carmen used to tell them about such occasions when they were little.

Bridget's notes to her parents hint at something that might be wrong between them. She writes a lengthy note to her mother but says that she doesn't intend to mail it, and her note to her father is brief and to the point.

As this section ends, the summer seems to be at a turning point for several of the girls as Carmen expresses her dismay at her father's upcoming marriage and the fact that she'll be gaining a stepbrother she doesn't like, and Lena reveals that the pants don't seem to have the magical powers that she'd expected.



Pages 60 through 79

Pages 60 through 79 Summary

The section beginning on page 60 introduces Lydia, the woman Carmen's father is planning to marry. In a page from her journal, she talks about the flowers that she's planning for the wedding and her need to pick up the girls' shoes so they can break them in before the day of the wedding. Tibby makes a list of people she will include in a documentary on people who live lives of desperation, including Wallman's employees Roberta and Duncan, a waitress named Brenda, and someone named Brian McBrian. Carmen makes a list of the items Lydia wants to serve at the wedding, and a separate list of the foods her father would probably prefer to serve, which turn out to be the same foods that were served at his wedding to Carmen's mother. Another page from Lydia's journal reveals that the hotel where they'd planned to have the ceremony has been flooded so they've decided to have it at home instead.

The section also introduces Carmen's soon-to-be-stepbrother Paul, who IMs a friend that Carmen is a good tennis player, and Carmen makes a list of places she'd rather be other than Charleston, including Baja, Santorini, Orlando, and back home in Bethesda. The reader also meets Bailey Graffman, a new friend of Tibby's who is helping her do a film documentary on Brian McBrian, a whiz at the video arcade game Dragon Master, which he play on the machine at the local Quik-Mart. Bridget notes that everyone in her cabin received gifts in the mail from their families, but she received only a cursory note from her father. Carmen complains about Krista's taste in movies, Krista complains that her efforts to befriend Carmen are not working, and Carmen sends her friends a rant about both Lydia and Krista. Tibby sends the pants to Carmen by express mail, but notes that nothing good happened to her during the time she had them. Lena gets a lengthy letter from her mother about the joys of Greece, and Bailey writes a letter to the Sega company telling them about Brian's skills at their Dragon Master game.

Pages 60 through 79 Analysis

The section beginning on page 60 finds the girls in the middle of their summer apart and things are not going well for Carmen. She continues to let her anger consume her while her soon-to-be stepfamily try to get along with her even in the face of her continued rejection. Their happiness and optimism are a stark contrast to her bitterness and their differences are clear from Carmen's descriptions of the wedding food and Krista's tastes in movies and clothing.

This section introduces several new characters who will become important later. Bailey has attached herself to Tibby and while Tibby pretends she's annoyed by it, the author leaves the impression that she secretly is developing a soft spot for the younger girl. Bridget's notes continue to hint at trouble between her parents and herself as she notes with some bitterness that while all her roommates at soccer camp received nice gifts

from their parents, she got only an impersonal note from her father and apparently nothing from her mother.



Pages 80 through 101

Pages 80 through 101 Summary

Lydia continues trying to befriend Carmen and include her in wedding preparations. She plans a spa day for herself, Carmen, and Krista. Later, Carmen sends the pants to Bridget along with a note indicating that things have gone wrong for her and hoping they bring better luck and some common sense to Bridget.

Tibby's summer continues to go downhill as she complains about the horrors of babysitting her much-younger siblings. Her story for the summer concludes with a list of things she hates about Bethesda Memorial Hospital, including the fact that Bailey is there and everyone looks worried and sad.

Boys come into the picture for two of the girls as Lena writes in great detail about Kostos, the young fisherman she's met, and Bridget, imagining that she's 21, makes a list of her favorite things, which include "soccer coaches names Eric." Later, Bridget leaves her phone number on a napkin, presumably meant for Eric. She also writes a note to Lena saying that as her coach, Eric is off limits, but she is obsessed with him and as such, she can't be responsible for her actions. Later, an ominous note from a Dr. Lambert says teachers are right to be concerned about Bridget because of issues that surfaced during psychological testing and calling her "single-minded to the point of recklessness." Lena is also strongly attracted to Kostos, listing his torso, face and eyes among the things she has drawn over the summer.

The reader learns that Bridget wrote a note to Lena when she sent the pants, but Lena didn't notice it until she was packing to leave Santorini. In the note, Bridget indicates that something significant has happened to her that should have made her feel complete, but instead left her feeling empty. She wishes she could talk to her mother - a thought that scares her - and she also wishes she could simply disappear to a place where nothing hurts anymore.

Lena's final note is to Tibby, saying that she told Kostos she loved him, wondering whether the pants brought him to her or simply gave her the courage to find love on her own, and hoping the pants will bring magic to Tibby as well.

Bridget's final note is a rule — in the event of an emergency the pants should go to the sister in the most need.

The section concludes with a note from Carmen. She states that fate had a hand in the events of the summer, and that while the pants might not have caused the things that happened to each of the girls, their magic lies in the fact that they bore witness to those events and held the girls together. She concludes by saying that while some things will never be the same, the four friends will always find their way back to each other.



Pages 80 through 101 Analysis

Lydia's journal entries are exuberant. Her excitement about including both Carmen and Krista in her plans give no indication that she is aware of Carmen's animosity toward her and the idea of the wedding. Her plans to treat both girls to a spa day before the wedding is a parallel to Carmen's spa-themed 8th birthday party, but she is far less enthusiastic about this event because of her resentment of Lydia and Krista. Carmen also provides a description of her efforts to agree with her father and Lydia on a movie rental, a frustrating exercise because the only films they want to watch involve weddings. However, when Paul offers to drive her to Blockbuster, she surprises even herself by agreeing to go and they have no problem agreeing on a movie to watch, indicating that perhaps Carmen will begin to accept the new members of her family.

Lena's lengthy letter about Kostos includes a vague reference to Bridget, like Kostos, having "lost everything," but without referring to the original book on which this companion piece is based, the reader has no way of knowing what that means at this point. Bridget's note to Lena seems to indicate a sexual encounter that went badly, and her wish that she could just disappear to a place where nothing hurts seems to foreshadow an ominous event still to occur.

The pants continue to be a source of connection for the girls as Carmen, while ranting about her dismay regarding the upcoming wedding, discovers a package, leaving the reader to wonder whether the arrival of the magic jeans will bring a change in her luck or her attitude.

The inclusion of Bailey's list of her favorite ice cream flavors demonstrates her continued importance, and her wistful note that she hopes to try a particular flavor someday foreshadows her illness and apparent death. The author also uses foreshadowing in Bridget's statement that she is obsessed with Eric, even though he's off limits to her, and can't be responsible for her actions.

While the book, as a companion piece to the original novel, does not explicitly state what happened to each girl, the author implies that each one experienced something significant and life-altering during their summer apart. In the end, the reader is left with the thought that the pants are magic, but not in their ability to actually change events. Instead, they are a witness to what occurs in each of their lives and a symbol of the glue that holds the group together no matter what happens.



The Dos and Don'ts of Keeping in Touch, Pages 105 through 116

The Dos and Don'ts of Keeping in Touch, Pages 105 through 116 Summary

The book's final section provides tips on how readers can stay in touch with their own friends, including the following:

- Instant messaging, but make sure your friend doesn't share a screen ID with someone else. Tibby includes a note about a boy sending her an instant message asking for advice about a girl they both knew. However, it turned out that it was actually Tibby's mother who was online and chatting with him.
- E-mail, which is quick and has the added advantage of being able to include photos. A note from Bridget says this is a good means of communication for people who aren't good with words or "touchy-feely" emotions. She also advises playing sports together as a good way of staying close to friends.
- Handwritten notes, which are a good way to tell a friend something immediately while you're in class, but can backfire if they're found by a teacher or another classmate.
- Snail mail, which is not immediate but overall the best way to communicate. The best letters are handwritten, legible, and made creative by using unusual paper, colorful pens, or drawings.

Additional notes include one from Bailey about keeping cards and letters in a special box so you can review them whenever you want, one from Lydia with advice about the etiquette of sending wedding invitations, and one from Carmen about choosing an appropriate pen.

The Dos and Don'ts of Keeping in Touch, Pages 105 through 116 Analysis

The book is intended for teenage girls and concludes with tips for helping them maintain friendships by staying in touch with the people most important to them. While the author gives a nod to currently popular means of communication such as instant messaging and e-mail, she urges readers to consider the old-fashioned method of handwritten letters and explains why they are more personal and long-lasting. This section is made more meaningful by the fact that the rest of the book is comprised of handwritten notes and letters between the book's main characters, which have clearly been an important part of their lives and their relationship.



Characters

Lena Kaligaris

Lena Kaligaris is a 16-year-old girl of Greek heritage. She loves art and is a talented sketch artist and painter. Lena hopes to make art a career. During the summer of her 16th year, she goes to Santorini, Greece to visit her grandparents, where she has the opportunity to experience a different culture for the first time. She soaks up the experience enthusiastically, taking advantage of opportunities to draw and paint the sights of the island, including a young Greek fisherman named Kostos. As they spend time together, Lena falls in love with Kostos. Shortly before she leaves to return to her home in Bethesda, she is able to overcome her fear and tell him how she feels. Lena is portrayed as a loving friend who is anxious to please everyone in her life, including her parents and her three closest friends.

Carmen Lowell

Carmen Lowell is a 16-year-old girl of Hispanic heritage. Her parents divorced when she was a child, an event that has affected her deeply. She misses her father very much and is thrilled when she gets the opportunity to spend the summer with him in Charleston, South Carolina, but is dismayed when she learns that he plans to remarry. Carmen takes an instant dislike to her new stepfamily and continues to harbor resentment toward them despite their efforts to befriend her.

From early childhood, Carmen is a "girly girl" who loves clothing, spa treatments, and good food. Much of her personality seems to have been formed by her parents' separation and her delight in the time she is able to spend with her father when he visits.

Bridget Vreeland

Bridget Vreeland, also known as Bee to her friends, is a 16-year-old girl from Bethesda, Maryland. She is obsessed with sports, especially soccer, and dreams of someday playing on the Olympic soccer team. She has a good sense of humor and a biting, sarcastic wit, but is a loyal friend to Lena, Carmen, and Tibby. The book indicates that she is experiencing some psychological problems related to reckless behavior, possibly having to do with issues involving her parents, but does not provide more specifics. During summer soccer camp in Baja, California, Bridget falls for Eric, one of her coaches, but the relationship apparently ends badly.



Tabitha

Tabitha Tomko-Rollins, known to her friends as Tibby, is a 16-year-old girl from Bethesda, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. She was an only child until age 13, when her parents decided to have more children, and she resents her younger siblings very much. Tibby is very smart and articulate, as evidenced by a strongly-worded letter she wrote at age 8 or 9 asking that she not be forced to play the piccolo anymore. Unlike her close friends, Tibby spends her 16th summer stuck at home in Bethesda, where she works at Wallman's discount store and babysits her younger siblings, much to her dismay. She is strongly affected by Bailey, a younger girl she befriends during the summer and who becomes gravely ill.

Lydia

Lydia is the fiancee of Carmen's father. She is very excited about her upcoming wedding and tries to involve Carmen in the planning despite Carmen's continued resentment of her relationship with her father.

Krista

Krista is Lydia's daughter and Carmen's future stepsister.

Paul

Paul is Lydia's son. Carmen dislikes him at first, but the two eventually form a friendship.

Bailey

Bailey is a younger girl who befriends Tibby. She becomes gravely ill and it is implied that she dies.



Objects/Places

Traveling Pants

The traveling pants are a pair of jeans that fit all four of the book's main characters even though their bodies are very different shapes and sizes. During the summer they spend apart, the girls ship the pants back and forth to each other, along with letters describing what is going on in their own lives.

Bethesda, Maryland

Bethesda, Maryland is a suburb of Washington, D.C. and the home of Lena, Carmen, Bridget, and Tibby.

Baja, California

Baja, California is a desert community in which Bridget's soccer camp is located.

Santorini, Greece

Santorini is a Greek island where Lena's grandparents live and where she visits them for the summer.

Charleston, South Carolina

Charleston is a city in South Carolina where Carmen's father lives and where she visits him during her 16th summer.

Wallman's

Wallman's is a discount store in Bethesda where Tibby gets a summer job.

Lydia's Journal

Lydia's journal is a diary in which Carmen's future stepmother writes about her excitement regarding her upcoming wedding. Several entries from the journal are included in Keep in Touch.

Notes and Letters

Keep in Touch is comprised primarily of short notes and letters written by the main characters and some of their friends and family members.

Themes

The Importance of Friendship

The primary theme of *Keep in Touch* is the importance of enduring friendships. The book's four main characters have been friends all their lives, but they are apart during the summer of their 16th year, at a time of great change for each of them. The notes and letters that comprise the early part of the book show that their friendship has had its ups and downs. For example, at age 12, Carmen writes an angry message to Tibby about her failure to come to Carmen's Halloween party, but all is forgiven when Tibby explains the reason for her absence.

At the same time the girls are preparing to be apart for the first time in their lives, they discover that a single pair of jeans fits each of them perfectly, and the pants become a symbol of their friendship and the love that binds them together. As the pants are shipped to each girl in turn, they are accompanied by notes and letters that share both the important events they're experiencing and the trivial things that make up their daily lives. As the summer draws to a close, the girls realize that while the pants don't really hold magical powers to make everything better, they are part of what holds their friendship together because they are shared equally among all four of them. The pants symbolize their love for each other and their constant presence in each other's lives even when they are not physically together.

Coming of Age

A coming of age novel is one in which one or more young characters experience growth and change that builds a bridge between childhood and adulthood. The main characters in *Keep in Touch* are all 16 years old, and during the summer during which they are apart for the first time, each of them goes through experiences that force them to grow up. Lena falls in love for the first time and must face her fears about letting someone into her heart and revealing her most intimate feelings. Bridget also falls for a boy, but in her case the relationship is an inappropriate one and the relationship ends badly. She is further challenged by difficulties in her relationship with her parents. Tibby deals with the disappointment of staying at home while her friends are having adventures elsewhere, but more important is her friendship with Bailey and the heartbreak of dealing with Bailey's critical illness and apparent death. Carmen faces extreme disappointment when she learns that her much-anticipated summer with her beloved father also includes his fiancée and her family, and she must overcome her resentment at the feeling that she has lost him to his new family. All of the girls' challenges and the insights they gain are shared through their notes, letters and other writings that comprise the book. Since this book is a companion piece rather than a self-contained novel, the author does not reveal the specific outcome of each girl's individual challenge, but implies that each of them grew and matured because of their experiences.



The Value of Written Communication

In the beginning of *Keep in Touch*, narrator Carmen tells the reader that the girls have no cell phones, Blackberries or other communication devices, so they must rely on the written word to stay in touch over the course of the summer. Their letters and notes to each other are of enormous value in sharing their varied experiences while they're apart, and their feelings about what happens to each of them. The book also includes a number of written pieces from earlier in their lives as a way of introducing each character and showing the development of their friendship over time. Their notes and letters provide a valuable history of their individual lives, their evolving personalities, their thoughts and opinions, and their relationships not only with each other, but also with other people who are important parts of their lives. The inclusion of written communications from other peripheral characters such as Lydia and Bailey provide further insights. The book's final section is devoted entirely to the importance of the written word as a personal means of communication that can be kept, reviewed, and savored over time. It also urges the reader to be careful about putting thoughts into writing because the written word is a permanent record.



Style

Point of View

Keep in Touch is told from the point of view of each character whose notes, letters, and diary entries are included in the book. Carmen serves as a narrator of sorts in the sense that the introduction comes from her, but beyond that, each piece of writing stands on its own. As such, the reader gets insights into each character's thoughts and feelings through the notes, letters, lists, etc. that they write. The book includes notes not only from the four main characters, but also from others such as the girls' parents, teachers, and other friends. These characters include Tibby's friend Bailey, whose wistful hope that she'll taste a particular flavor of ice cream someday, hints at her illness and impending death; Lydia, who writes with great enthusiasm about her upcoming wedding and seems oblivious to Carmen's resentment of her; and Bridget's parents, whose curt notes demonstrate the strained relationship they have with their daughter.

Setting

The book is set in several locations because each of the four main characters spend their 16th summer in a different place. The early part of the book takes place in Bethesda, Maryland, a Washington, D.C. suburb where the girls live with their parents. The entries from Tibby also take place in Bethesda as she spends her summer working at a discount store there. The Greek island of Santorini is the home of Lena's grandparents and the setting for the notes she writes to her friends during the summer. Bridget's letters come from Baja, California, a desert community that is the home of the soccer camp she attends, and Carmen writes from Charleston, South Carolina, where her father has lived since his divorce from Carmen's mother.

Language and Meaning

Keep in Touch is not a novel, but rather a collection of notes and letters to, from, and about each of the four main characters. As such, the language and tone change to fit the personality of the character who writes each individual piece. The earliest entries are from the girls' childhoods and the language is appropriately childish, including misspelled words in one instance. As the book progresses, each character's individual personality becomes clear through the writing style, choice of words and tone of their communications. For example, Tibby is articulate from a very early age and shows an impressive vocabulary in her plea to be released from playing the piccolo, while Lena's sweet personality comes through in her notes.

The book is designed as a companion piece to the novel *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* and does not stand alone as a self-contained story. For that reason, it would have little meaning for someone who has not read the original book because while the reader gets a sense of the characters' personalities and the events that take



place in their lives, many things are left unexplained or up in the air. For example, it is presumed that someone who has read the original novel would know about the specific difficulties between Bridget and her parents, but *Keep in Touch* does not explain the exact nature of the apparent strain in their relationship.

Structure

Keep in Touch is a companion piece to the author's earlier book, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and therefore has no plot of its own. Instead, it uses a series of notes, letters, and other forms of written communication to follow the lives of the four main characters and provide additional insights into their personalities and lives.

Following an introduction narrated by Carmen, the entries begin with early childhood notes and party invitations that begin to reveal each girl's interests and personalities, and proceed into entries dated during their 16th summer. Many are self-explanatory and stand alone, while others include a brief note of explanation letting the reader know the circumstances under which the note was written and the age of the writer at the time. A key is provided at the beginning of the book to denote which girl is writing which entry and the keys are indicative of each girl's individual personality - a heart for sweet Lena, a flower for girly Carmen, an asterisk for articulate Tibby, and a star for soccer star Bridget. Because most of the notes are handwritten, the reader quickly learns to recognize each girl's distinctive handwriting as a way to immediately identify from whom each letter or other entry comes.

The book's final section includes advice from the author about staying in touch with friends through written communications, along with bits and pieces of specific advice from some of the book's characters.



Quotes

"The Traveling Pants are the magic fibers that hold our friendship together"
(Introduction, p. 4).

"A friendship can weather most things and thrive in thin soil, but it needs a little mulch of letters and small, silly presents every so often - just to save it from drying out completely" (p. 7).

"I would vote for #2 except I think it should be about a girl who finds out her mother is the target of a hit person" (p. 33).

"I think they would all be great" (p. 33).

"Have something earth-shattering happen to me when I'm wearing the Pants - like meet Orlando Bloom!" (p. 42).

"She takes it in a folder to Charleston to show her father. It never comes out of the folder" (p. 45).

"Movies are made about many incredible things. One of them is keeping in touch with the friends you love" (p. 48).

"Good thing I'm not mailing this postcard" (p. 56).

"So why didn't my dad tell me he was getting married?" (p. 58).

"Other than that, the only thing I have to show for the Pants is the kid that delivered them. A wise-ass pain in the neck who's decided to permanently glue herself to my hip" (p. 74).

"What can I say? I'm obsessed. And as we all know, we obsessed girls can't be responsible for our actions" (p. 92).

"Regarding Bridget Vreeland...teachers are right to be concerned...need to talk to Bridget's father about issues raised during psych. testing...possible after-school counseling...single-minded to the point of recklessness...follow-up is necessary" (p. 94).

"I wish so much I could talk to my mom. I need her. And that scares me. I wish I could talk to you, Lena. I wish I could disappear, just float away to some place where nothing hurts anymore" (p. 97).

"And I wonder - did the Pants bring it to me? Or did they just give me the courage to find it on my own?" (p. 99).

"In the event of an emergency, the Pants automatically go to the sister in need, regardless of the schedule" (p. 100).

"It would be easy to say that the Pants changed everything this summer. But looking back now, I see that our lives changed because they had to. And that the real magic of the Pants was in bearing witness to this, and in somehow holding us together when it seemed like nothing would ever be the same again" (p. 101).



Topics for Discussion

How do the girls' invitations for their 8th birthday parties and their Christmas lists at age 11 show how their personalities are already being shaped? Include specific examples for each girl.

Cite at least three examples of times when a note that seems unimportant actually foreshadows something that will occur later.

Compare and contrast Carmen with her soon-to-be-stepsister Krista. How does Carmen make their differences clear? What do they have in common?

What do you think the relationship is like between Bridget and her parents? Cite at least three examples of notes or comments to back up your opinion.

Discuss the role of symbolism in the book. Specifically, what do the pants symbolize for the four main characters?

Discuss several ways of staying in touch with friends. Which are best for friends you see frequently? Which are best for those who live far away or those you don't see often? What are the advantages and disadvantages of communicating in writing rather than by phone or in person?

Discuss how each of the four main characters changes over the course of the summer. Do some change in ways that are more significant than others? What events, both positive and negative, form the most significant influences on them?

Choose one example of an occurrence in the book that is left unclear if the reader is not familiar with the book *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. Then discuss what you think might have happened.