

# Discussion Guide

## *Tommy: the Gun That Changed America*

by Karen Blumenthal, 2015, Roaring Book Press

### BOOK SYNOPSIS

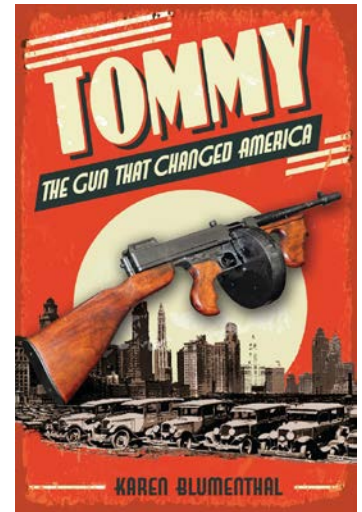
John Taliaferro Thompson had a mission: to develop a lightweight, fast-firing weapon that would help Americans win on the battlefield.

Once called "the deadliest weapon, pound for pound, ever devised by man," his Thompson submachine gun could deliver a hundred bullets in a matter of seconds. But the career military man didn't anticipate what would happen next. Long before it reached the battlefields of World War II, the Tommy gun became the weapon of choice for Al Capone, John Dillinger, and a generation of bootleggers and bank-robbing outlaws.

It would terrorize communities, mesmerize movie goers, and claim the lives of dozens of gangsters and law enforcement officers on its way to becoming a deadly American icon.

Set against the backdrop of Prohibition and the Great Depression, this is the story of how one man's patriotic vision moved from the drawing board to the streets—of the lives it changed, the debate it sparked, and the unprecedented response it inspired.

*Tommy: The Gun That Changed America* received starred reviews from *Booklist*, *Kirkus*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *School Library Journal*!



### ABOUT KAREN BLUMENTHAL

**“Ole Golly told me if I was going to be a writer I better write down everything ... so I’m a spy that writes down everything.” —*Harriet the Spy*, Louise Fitzhugh**

Like Harriet M. Welsch, the title character in *Harriet the Spy*, award-winning author Karen Blumenthal is an observer of the world around her. In fact, she credits the reading of *Harriet the Spy* as a child with providing her the impetus to capture what was happening in the world around her and become a writer herself. Like most authors, Blumenthal was first a reader and an observer. She frequented the public library as a child and devoured books by Louise Fitzhugh and Beverly Cleary. She says as a child she was a “nerdy obnoxious kid with glasses” who became a “nerdy obnoxious kid with contacts” as a teen. She also loved sports and her hometown Dallas sports teams as a kid and, consequently, read books by sports writer, Matt Christopher, who inspired her to want to be a sports writer when she grew up.



In college, thinking she might major in accounting, Blumenthal spent time at the campus newspaper office, which renewed her interest in writing and journalism. Eventually, she majored in economics at Duke University, and went on to earn an MBA from Southern Methodist University. She combined her interests in business and writing working for the *Wall Street Journal*, and has been a journalist for over twenty-five years.

Blumenthal has shared her expertise through appearances on the *Today Show*, *ABC World News Tonight*, and the *Nightly Business Report*.

Blumenthal is passionate about the importance of nonfiction reading and writing for young people. She says, "...I believe in its ability to help us understand the bigger picture things and all of the information that swirls around us every day." She has written several nonfiction books for teens and adults. In an address to middle schoolers as part of the 2012-13 Spirit of Texas Middle School Reading Program she said, "I'm quite fascinated by true stories. I always think they're so interesting, sometimes more interesting than what you can make up." Blumenthal demonstrates this enthusiasm in her writing of nonfiction for young people.

She and her husband have two daughters and live in the Dallas area where they are great fans of their hometown sports teams. As an ardent advocate for public libraries, Blumenthal serves on the Friends of the Dallas Public Library board.

## ADDITIONAL BOOKS BY KAREN BLUMENTHAL

*Six Days in October: The Stock Market Crash of 1929* (2002)

*Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX: The Law That Changed the Future of Girls in America* (2005)

*Grande Expectations: A Year in the Life of Starbucks' Stock* (2007)

*The Wall Street Journal Guide to Starting Your Financial Life* (2009)

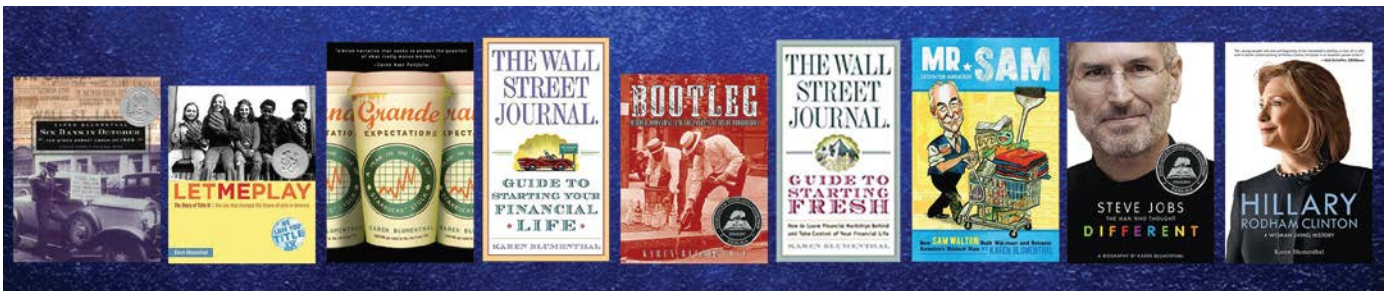
*Bootleg: Murder, Moonshine, and the Lawless Years of Prohibition* (2011)

*The Wall Street Journal Guide to Starting Fresh* (2011)

*Mr. Sam: How Sam Walton Built Wal-Mart and Became America's Richest Man* (2011)

*Steve Jobs: The Man Who Thought Different* (2012)

*Hillary Rodham Clinton: A Woman Living History* (coming in 2016)



Visit Karen Blumenthal's website: <http://www.karenblumenthal.com/>

## BEFORE YOU READ

1. Examine the cover of the *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America*. What are your first impressions and expectations of the book based on what the cover tells you? Does the cover suggest an audience for this book? Describe that audience.
2. Consider your views on gun production and ownership. In the Bill of Rights, the 2nd Amendment states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Taking into account that this amendment was adopted in 1791, do you feel that it is still relevant today?
3. In your opinion, what is the current state of gun violence in America? What are your feelings regarding this issue?

## AFTER YOU READ

1. In the Prologue to *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America*, Blumenthal relates the story of the Elizabeth, New Jersey, robbery of a U.S. mail truck and the murder of the driver of that truck in 1926. It is one of many gruesome crimes detailed in the book in which the Thompson submachine gun was used. Blumenthal quotes a *New York Times* commentator who stated, "American criminals have turned the deadliest weapons of modern warfare against society." (p. 3) The developer of the Thompson submachine gun, John Taliaferro Thompson, originally designed the gun to be used by the American military to save the lives of American soldiers. However, the gun became a question of good intent versus unintentional consequences. Discuss other examples of products that were originally designed with good intentions but then had unintentional negative consequences.
2. Discuss the business and economic aspects of the development of the Thompson submachine gun. At what point did Thompson's good intentions become overshadowed by the desire to make money? Blumenthal quotes sporting-goods dealer, Peter Von Frantzius, as saying, "We are in the business of selling firearms," when asked if he was concerned about the use of the Thompson submachine guns that he sold to the individuals involved in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre and other crimes. (p. 86) Can you think of examples of products that do, or have done, harm which are carefully marketed and sold, despite the fact that there are known harms associated with these products?
3. Blumenthal states on page 7 that, "...in Gatling's day, military men believed that war should be fought by men, not machines." Compare this statement to contemporary warfare. How are contemporary wars fought? Consider our current "war on terror." Are guns relevant in modern warfare?
4. The author details the ways in which weaponry was tested by John Thompson and Major Louis A. La Garde. Would these methods have been acceptable had the public been aware of their use? Would these methods be acceptable today? What protections are currently in place to prevent such experimentation?
5. What are your perceptions of the National Rifle Association (NRA)? How have the guiding principles of the NRA changed since its inception in 1871 when its goal was "...to improve the marksmanship of potential soldiers through training and shooting contests"? (pp. 13-4) What impact did the NRA have on politics at the time of its inception versus its impact on current politics?
6. In her acceptance speech in 2013 for YALSA's Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults Finalist Award for *Steve Jobs: The Man Who Thought Different*, Blumenthal says that when she is asked, "What do you want teens to learn from Steve Jobs?" she answers, "...what better example could there be of persistence and drive and passion?" Discuss the significance of "persistence and drive and passion" in the development of the Thompson submachine gun. Though Thompson and the other owners and employees of Auto-Ordnance were persistent, they did not have the gun ready before the end of World War I. What role did this fact have in the Thompson submachine gun being used for unintended purposes?
7. Marketing is significant in the sale of any product. Think about the ways in which the Thompson submachine gun was marketed post World War I, starting with the look of the gun, the naming of the gun ("The press also began to give the gun a list of nicknames: Chatterbox, Chicago Piano, Chopper, Chicago Typewriter. But the most common was just a simple play on the name: Tommy gun." (p. 71), demonstrations of the gun, and the ways in which it was characterized in the media ("...probably the most efficient man-killer of any firearm yet produced." (p. 44). Who was the intended audience for this marketing campaign? In what ways was the marketing of the Thompson submachine gun effective, and in what ways was it ineffective? Discuss current products, especially those that might be potentially harmful, that you feel are effectively marketed. For instance, look at this *CBS News* story, dated September 7, 2103,

about the marketing of e-cigarettes to kids, “Is E-cigarette Marketing Appealing to Kids?”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqxPjU5TsQ>

8. One of the unintended consequences of the development of the Thompson submachine gun was that it eventually got into the hands of foreign governments and was used against allies of the United States. Discuss the ways in which this remains an issue today.
9. Another unintended consequence of the development of the Thompson submachine gun was that it got into the hands of the criminal element before it got into the hands of crime fighters. Think about the infamous criminals characterized in *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America* (Al Capone, Hymie Weiss, William Crowley, Bugs Moran, Fred “Killer” Burke, “Pretty Boy” Floyd, Vincent Coll, Frank “Jelly” Nash, George “Machine Gun” Kelly, John Dillinger, and Lester Gillis or George “Baby Face” Nelson). Besides the use of the Thompson submachine gun to commit crimes or to end the lives of these criminals, what characteristics did these individuals have in common? What role did the “Tommy gun” and the qualities of these criminals play in the public’s romanticizing, via the press and Hollywood, of these individuals and their crimes? Why did the public become so fascinated with these criminals? Are there modern day “bad boy” and “bad girl” versions of these criminals?
10. Consider the Bureau of Investigation, which later became the Federal Bureau of Investigation (the FBI). Early on, the bureau “...specialized in analyzing information, collecting evidence, and interviewing witnesses” (p. 57) and “...agents had few detective skills and almost no experience in tracking down criminals...” (p.113) What role did the Thompson submachine gun play in changing the guiding principles of the Bureau of Investigation, and in the development of J. Edgar Hoover’s career? How is the portrait Blumenthal paints of the early years of the Bureau the same, or different from, your current perceptions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation?
11. Marcellus Thompson and his colleagues professed to be disturbed by the use of the Thompson submachine gun (“We designed the gun for law enforcement and military usage...I feel very sorry now to learn that one of them is in the hands of the lawless element. Its killing power is terrible.” p. 68). He later said, “I don’t know any way of stopping it. What can I do?” (p. 80). Do you feel that Thompson and his colleagues had a responsibility to try and correct the wrong that had been done? If so, did they do enough? Compare this to contemporary products that cause harm (nuclear bombs, automobiles, and cigarettes, for example), and discuss the responsibilities of the developers of these products when their products cause harm.
12. On page 77, Blumenthal discusses gun laws of the period. She says, “There were no regulations on the sale of Tommy guns, or any other machine gun.” Take a look at the current *ATF: Federal Firearms Regulations Reference Guide 2014* (<https://www.atf.gov/file/11241/download>). How have gun regulations changed since the 1920’s? Do you feel that current laws adequately control the production, sale, ownership, and use of automatic weapons? What about the production, sale, ownership, and use of handguns? Why or why not?
13. How did current events of the time impact the successes and failures of the Thompson submachine gun? Consider World Wars I and II, Prohibition, the Great Depression, and labor conditions. What role do today’s current events seem to be playing in the gun industry and in the conversation about gun issues?
14. Discuss why you think it is that incidents involving gun violence, like the July, 1931, New York City incident in which an innocent child was killed and several children were injured (pp. 95-6), or the killing of 22 innocent children and 6 innocent adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December of 2012 (pp. 189-90), raise awareness and increase discussion of gun violence in America, but seem to do little to change gun laws. In fact, one of the most striking aspects of *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America* is that many of the issues debated at the time are issues still being debated today. One might think that humans appear not to learn from the past and from history. What is your opinion in this regard?

15. On page 153, Blumenthal states, "...efforts, including the disarming of blacks during Reconstruction, underscored a reality throughout American history: Those with guns held political power and those without firearms clearly did not." Compare and contrast this statement with what you observe about contemporary gun ownership and power.

16. Though the Tommy gun may be "the gun that changed America," do you regard it as a success or a failure? Explain.

## **FOLLOW-UP**

1. Re-examine the cover of the book. Think about your first impressions and expectations of *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America* based on your initial inspection of the cover. Does the book cover accurately convey to potential readers what is actually contained in the book? Why or why not?
2. The book's back matter contains an extensive bibliography and "Notes, Quotes, and Other Details," indicating that Blumenthal did intensive research to prepare for the writing of *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America*. What is the significance of research in the writing of nonfiction? Do you feel Blumenthal's research was adequate? What impact did her research have on you as a reader?
3. In her 2013 acceptance speech for the YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults Finalist Award, Blumenthal stated, "That's the power of nonfiction – to enlighten, inform, and sometimes entertain. To, as I've said before, provide context for a complex and sometimes mysterious world." Now that you have completed *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America*, comment on Blumenthal's success in enlightening, informing, entertaining, and providing context for readers.

## **EXPLORE FURTHER**

Consult Blumenthal's extensive bibliography at the back of *Tommy: The Gun That Changed America* for additional materials on the subjects covered in the book.

### **Additional Books on the Thompson Submachine Gun:**

*The Thompson M1A1 Submachine Gun* (Firearm Anatomy series, Book 1) by David S. Findlay (2013)  
*The Thompson Submachine Gun: From Prohibition Chicago to World War I* by Martin Pegler (2010)

### **Additional Books on Gun Issues:**

*Guns and Crimes* (At Issue series) by Noel Morino (a look at contemporary gun issues) (2014)  
*Gun Control* (History of Issues series) by Mitchell Young (2006)

### **Additional Books on Prohibition:**

*Prohibition* (Defining Moments series) by Jeff Hill (2004)  
*Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* by Daniel Okrent (2009)  
*Bootleg: Murder, Moonshine, and the Lawless Years of Prohibition* by Karen Blumenthal (2011)

### **Additional Books on Criminals of the Era:**

*Baby Face Nelson: Portrait of a Public Enemy* by Steven Nickel (2002)  
*John Dillinger: The Life and Death of America's First Celebrity Criminal* by Dary Matera (2005)  
*Public Enemies: America's Greatest Crime Wave and the Birth of the FBI, 1933-34* by Bryan Burrough (2009)  
*A Travel Guide to Al Capone's Chicago* by Diane Yancey (2003)

## ADDITIONAL DIGITAL RESOURCES

<http://www.loc.gov/>

Check out the Library of Congress website's information about the Progressive Era to New Era - 1900-1929 and the Great Depression and WWII, 1929-1945.

<http://www.chicagohs.org/history/capone.html>

Check out the Chicago History Museum's collection of information on Al Capone and other related information.

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/prohibition/>

You can view Ken Burns' and Lynn Novick's acclaimed *Prohibition* film at the Public Broadcasting System's website.

[https://www.pbs.org/hueypnewton/people/people\\_hoover.html](https://www.pbs.org/hueypnewton/people/people_hoover.html)

PBS has extensive information on Hoover and the F.B.I.

<http://www.pbs.org/program/al-capone-icon/>

Check out PBS for information on criminals like Al Capone.

<http://www.fbi.gov> and <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/brief-history>

The Federal Bureau of Investigation offers extensive information about the history of the FBI.

<https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/directors/hoover>

J. Edgar Hoover

<https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/famous-cases/al-capone>

Famous criminals and cases, including Al Capone

<https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/famous-cases/john-dillinger>

John Dillinger

<https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/famous-cases/machine-gun-kelly>

Machine Gun Kelly

\* This would be a good opportunity for you to discuss sources and the lens through which sources view and present information. For instance, how might the FBI's imparting of information about these individuals be colored by the lens through which they view individuals like Al Capone, John Dillinger, and Machine Gun Kelly?