A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Don’t Come Out

The Horizon Cases, Book Three · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

While Nadia Cole accepts an award for protecting children, her friend Celia takes Nadia’s home visit. By morning Celia and the mother she visited are dead, and Nadia finds the mother’s seven-year-old, Nevaeh, in a basement dryer with NADIA written on her arm. Nevaeh’s first words are “I’m on nine.” Detectives blame her mother’s ex, and he confesses, but Nevaeh says he was the knocking man, not the inside man. Then a car starts idling outside her foster home, lights off.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

- Believing a Child
- A Mother’s Last Plan
- Who Gets to Write Down the Truth
- Guilt of the One Who Lived
- Trust in the People Meant to Protect
- Found Family

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

35 questions in 8 parts. Choose the ones that spark your group, or work through them in order.

First Impressions

01 The book opens with Lanae lifting Nevaeh out of the bath early and pulling two pairs of socks onto her feet. When Nevaeh asks if it is Christmas yet, Lanae’s thumb stays on the sock before she says, “Not yet, baby.” What did you think was happening in that house the first time, and how did the chapter read once you knew?

02 In the basement Pasko tugs the dryer door once, feels it go back, and says, “Dryer’s jammed, skip it.” Nadia kneels and speaks into the gap instead. What made her look twice when trained officers did not?

03 Nevaeh’s first words out of the drum are “I’m on nine.” What did that line tell you about her before you understood the count?

04 In the car Nevaeh asks, “Are you the lady?” Yes is “the easy word,” and Nadia answers, “I’m Nadia.” Why do you think she refused it?

05 At the wake Frank tells Nadia, “It should have been you.” At the funeral lunch he silences a cousin with “Celia sent her to the banquet. Celia. Leave her be.” How did you read Frank in those early chapters, and how do those lines sound to you now?

Lanae’s Plan

06 Lanae rehearses her confession to the stove: “I hit her with that belt. I leave her by herself at night.” The belt is new, “the leather still stiff from the store.” What did it cost her to report herself as an abuser in order to save her child?

07 Night after night Lanae trains Nevaeh until the dryer door stays shut even for “Nevaeh, it’s Mama.” Sitting beside it in the dark, “she was glad.” How did you feel about that training once you understood what it was for?

08 Keyonna says of Lanae, “She hated cops more than she hated him. Only the state.” After what happened to Lanae at fourteen, could she have trusted anyone else?

09 In the drive-through lot the detective tells fourteen-year-old Lanae, “Nobody believes a girl twice.” Where else did you hear that sentence in the book, and who proves it wrong?

10 In her last chapter Lanae keeps the count with her left hand under the table while she fights with her right: “Whatever finger her girl was on, Lanae was on it too.” What did that chapter do to you?

Nevaeh and the Count

11 In her interview Nevaeh tells the night in fingers: “Two fingers, the man came. Five fingers, he said Nadia.” Kaye first calls the count “a game,” then asks how fast Nevaeh counts. Would you have trusted a seven-year-old’s count as evidence, and when did you start to?

12 Watching Tillman on the news, Nevaeh says, “That’s the knocking man. He wasn’t the inside man.” Pasko hears “So he lied about being there. Good.” How do the adults in this book hear only what fits what they already believe?

13 Nevaeh pulls off the socks Pasko gave her, smells them, and drops them in the trash. Later she breathes in her mother’s cardigan and says “Christmas,” and in church she freezes and says, “It’s the Christmas smell.” When did you understand what the peppermint meant?

14 Clarence never reaches for Nevaeh. He sits on the kitchen floor and slides his fork and plate under the table, and later pulls her down the hall in a laundry basket, beeping. Why do his ways reach her when others fail?

15 Nevaeh hides Nadia's red notebook in the bread box, then tests her: "What did I say about the dog?" What was she really asking, and why did Nadia pass?

Nadia and the Notebook

16 Every entry Nadia writes begins "Child states:" Pasko warns her, "You keep writing down every word she says, and she's going to be the reason Tillman walks." By the end her notes have been read by a judge, a lawyer, a lieutenant and the killer. Is writing it down a protection, a danger, or both?

17 From the back seat Nevaeh says, "Don't write that down," and Nadia writes it at the red light anyway while Nevaeh watches the pen. Was she right?

18 Knowing the detective on the case gets a copy, Nadia types "Child is frightened by the smell of candy canes / peppermint." into the safety plan, and later invents a dentist appointment to see who reads the file. How did you judge her choices about what to put on paper?

19 In Lyndon's front room Nadia rubs a pencil over the legal pad, tears off the page, and keeps it from the police. "It was a crime." Did you understand why she did it?

20 At Hattie's sink Nadia drowns her notebook page by page, then writes the line Frank dictates in her own form. Kaye later warns that because of this page, Nevaeh may one day have to face a jury. What did that night cost Nadia, and what might it cost Nevaeh?

21 At the banquet Nadia says, "Somebody has to write down what a child actually said." At the end she opens a new notebook and writes, "Nobody but me reads this." How has she changed?

The People Around Nadia

22 Celia's voicemail says, "Tomorrow I'm going to need you to write something down exactly the way I say it. Don't let me talk you out of it." How did your view of Celia change after the crate, the calendar, and the 3:40 text that begins "It's me tonight, not her"?

23 Patricia carries her retirement papers in her bag for months. After she remembers telling her table, "Cole's straight out after her plaque, she's got a 9:30," she draws a line through the date. How much of that night belongs to her?

24 Pasko's white tape, his peppermints, his visit to Nadia's kitchen and his car on Thanksgiving all point at him. At the end he lifts the tape: "Shaving nick," "Same place thirty years." How did the author make you suspect him, and how did you feel about him by the last chapter?

25 Renee tells Pasko, "You sat in the car, Pasko," and he can only say, "I know." His signed statement admits it. Does his parting line, "Next time you get a kid nobody believes, call me, Cole," earn anything back?

26 Danita says, "He carried me up those stairs," and for twenty years she has gone to his Christmas party and watched. Why do you think so many people who saw something said nothing for so long?

Hattie, Clarence and Leo

27 Clarence keeps a list in his Racing Form of "Every car that idles on my street" and promises, "Saturday I'll have it all." What did his death take out of the story, and out of Nevaeh's world?

28 Hattie hands over her husband's revolver and asks Nadia to "write down that I never once kept it loaded." Later she searches her house with a cast-iron skillet and refuses to move: "This one's hers." What kind of foster mother is she?

29 Tillman keeps his confession because "I take it back, she pays." In the hospital lobby he tells Nadia, "I can't raise her," and "Tell her I would've." Was his choice love, surrender, or both?

30 Tillman's board reads "TELL NEVAEH I WASNT THE INSIDE MAN," and Feld answers, "She told us first." What does it mean that a seven-year-old knew the truth before every adult in the case?

The Twists

31 Maureen explains, "Leo. Only her. For the lion, his birthday." Did you catch the small brass lion Nadia packs into Celia's box, and how did the name Leo hide the killer in plain sight?

32 In the kitchen the killer asks, "When's Nadia coming?" and Lanae thinks, "And he had the wrong name." Who was the trap built for, and why do you think he came expecting Nadia?

33 Frank makes Nadia call into the dark hall, and she says, "Don't come out. Not even for me." What did it take to say that, and what would you have said?

The Ending and Beyond

34 Nevaeh keeps Celia's last words until Nadia has no book: "She's not coming. You'll never get her. This was mine, Leo. Mine." Then she adds, "She said it for you." Why do you think she waited, and what did those words change for you about Celia?

35 In the last chapter Nevaeh stops at nine because "Every time I stopped, Mama was still coming." Hattie, not Nadia, tells her, "Ten times through your fingers," and the book ends on "I'm warm." Did the ending feel right to you, and what do you think the series will ask of Nadia next?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Try the count. Have one member time a minute while the group counts at Nevaeh's pace of fifty-two a minute, folding a finger every hundred. Then talk about how long seven hours in the dark would feel.
- Write it down exactly. One member tells a short story about their week, and everyone else writes it "exactly the way" it was said. Compare the pages and see whose words survived.
- Hold a vote: at what point should someone in authority have believed Nevaeh? Vote again at the end of the meeting and see who changed their mind.
- Talk about passwords. Amara's school password is the name of Nadia's cat. Share, only if you are comfortable, how your family decides who a child can trust.
- Cast it. Who would play Nadia, Nevaeh, Hattie, Clarence, and Pasko, and why?