A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Don’t Say Mercy

The Fear Trade, Book One · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

Every twenty minutes, Harrow Fields re-enacts the 1989 Harrow family murders for a cheering crowd. Five died. The sixth was never found. Bram Lowry signs on as a scare actor to watch over his daughter, Tess, who works the box office. The gate’s one rule is simple: say the safe word, MERCY, and an actor walks you out. A hooded woman says it and means it, Bram walks her to an exit in the corn, and when she screams, three hundred people applaud. She never reaches the parking lot, and the town starts looking at the new actor.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

- Fear Sold as Entertainment
- The Crowd That Watches and Does Nothing
- A Father and Daughter Hiding the Same Secret
- Grief After a Mother’s Death
- A Town That Forgives Anything for a Good Season

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

35 questions in 7 parts. Choose the ones that spark your group, or work through them in order.

First Impressions

01 In the first chapter Lacey Duvall says MERCY once as a joke, then again and means it, and Bram walks her to the release exit in the corn. How did you feel about Bram after that walk, and when did you decide to trust him?

02 Three hundred guests chant the parlor countdown while Lacey is hooded again, and they applaud her real scream. What did that opening tell you about the book you were about to read?

03 When Lacey goes missing, Gail tells the press that Lacey used a release option in her signed agreement. How does the Lights Out waiver turn a missing woman into paperwork?

04 Every chapter opens on the date and the nights left until Halloween. How did the countdown change the way you read?

05 Burlap turns up in Bram's locker, and the town decides a copycat started the week he arrived. Did you ever suspect Bram, and for how long?

Bram and Tess

06 Bram takes the Hog Man role to keep Tess in sight, then lets her keep her box-office job. Was that the right call for a father who had lost his wife a year before?

07 On the Tower at dawn, Tess admits she has been hunting the man who plays the father since August, through her dead mother's texts. How did that change your view of the girl Bram thought he was protecting?

08 On the road home over the Sugar Run bridge, Bram finally tells Tess what he said to her mother before she left, and that he did not go with her. Why did he keep it from Tess for a year, and could you forgive him?

09 Found barefoot in the corn at 3 a.m., Tess claims she remembers nothing. Why do you think she lied, and what was the lie protecting?

10 In the hospice video on Laurel's laptop, Bram learns that his wife was the Harrow girl, and he tells Tess. How did knowing she is a Harrow change Tess, and change the danger she was in?

11 Father and daughter each hid the same hunt from the other. Whose secret did you find harder to forgive, and did the truth bring them closer?

Harrow Fields and the Town

12 Track 3, the scream every guest applauds, is Lenore Harrow's real 1989 call to the sheriff's office, and Sheriff Ames sold it to Gail. What did it mean to you that crowds had cheered her last minutes every twenty minutes for years?

13 The county board overrules Ames's move to close the park because of its 140 jobs. Is a town's need for work ever a fair reason to keep the gates open, and who carries the blame for that vote?

14 Gail babysat the Harrow children, found Gus in 2013, chose to believe he was the farmhand, and then picked the walk-offs herself. Why do you think she chose to believe him, and what did she get in return?

15 Gail reopens the spot where Jordyn Pace died as a paid exhibit, and guests film the deaths and rate them as effects. Where does the crowd's responsibility begin?

16 Rusty Gaskill turns a deputy away at the gate and moves the walk-offs' cars, and the call Laurel made from the Sugar Run bridge was logged low priority. How does the book show what a small town's quiet loyalties cost?

Gus

17 Gus is the kind old actor who wrote the count, teaches the new cast the ropes, and greets Tess warmly at the box office. Looking back, which of his small kindnesses frightens you most?

18 Found at the release exit with the tie knife, Gus confesses to being the man the town has hunted since 1989, and for a while the book lets you believe he is Abel Wynn come home. Were you convinced, and what made you doubt it?

19 The proof that Gus is Silas Harrow comes from a little finger that never curls, the hand in Davey's collar in the portrait, and Lenore's words recovered from under the line hiss. Why do you think the author let a hand and a voice give him away, and never his face?

20 Since 2012, Silas has played the murdered father in his own parlor every twenty minutes, and the crowd has applauded. What did that do to the way you remembered every Harrow House scene in the book?

21 Bram comes home to a table set for five with a sixth chair, and his own name at the head as the father. Who do you think set it, and what did family mean to Gus?

Gabe and the Second Figure

22 Gabe lends Bram a charger, clears him with the timecode, and is the first person at Harrow Fields who seems to be on his side. When did you first suspect him, if you did?

23 Bram covers for Gabe when Gabe deletes the badge record from the Named Scare night. How did that choice look once you knew who Gabe was?

24 Petra's alibi table shows Gus on the parlor camera at the minutes Jordyn and Hailey died. How did learning that someone else was still killing change the case you thought was closed?

25 Gabe is Gabriel Wynn, Abel's son, who wanted to be the one who comes. Did his reason make him more frightening, more pitiable, or both?

26 Under the Tower, Gus kills Gabe with the corn knife. How did you feel watching one killer end another?

Choices With No Right Answer

27 Bram can drag Tess home or leave her where someone knows her name. Knowing everything now, was keeping her at Harrow Fields a mistake?

28 When the prosecutor declines the 2026 counts, Petra keeps Gus on the grounds as bait. Was that a risk worth taking?

29 Petra refuses to use Tess, Tess and Gail go around her, and Bram does not tell Petra. Was his silence loyalty to his daughter or a danger to her?

30 In the 11:40 show, Bram steps off his mark and leaves Tess in the dark for three counts to reach the work-light breaker. Would you have done the same?

The Ending and Beyond

31 In full light, Tess takes the feed sack off her grandfather's head and says his real name. Why does it matter that she is the one who unmasks him?

32 At midnight the cleaned call plays into the empty house, and Bram turns it off before it reaches the breath. Why do you think he stops it there?

33 A cadaver dog sits down in the rows ahead of the combine, fourteen flags go in, and Abel Wynn will finally be buried under his own name. What did the harvest leave you feeling?

34 The last track, uploaded at 3:12 a.m., holds forty seconds of Tess asleep and a second breath closer to the microphone than hers. Who do you think was in the room?

35 The series is called The Fear Trade. After this book, how do you feel about the haunted attractions, scary nights and true-crime stories we pay for?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Before the meeting, have each member think of a time they were truly frightened at a haunted house, a scary film or a ghost tour, and whether anyone around them noticed. Share only what you are comfortable sharing.
- Talk about safe words. Would you trust one in a place built to scare you, and what would it take for a stranger to believe you meant it?
- Make a list of everything the group was sure of as the book went on: the copycat, the sheriff, the farmhand come home. Mark where each belief fell apart and who saw it coming.
- Debate the box-office job. Split into Bram's side and Tess's side and argue whether she should have stayed at Harrow Fields.

- Cast it. Who would play Bram, Tess, Gus, Gail, Gabe and Petra, and why?
