A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Failure to Protect

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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Four-year-old Alma Varela wears two braids her mother plaits every night and carries a gray stuffed rabbit named Conejo. When Chicago caseworker Nadia Cole answers an anonymous neglect report, she finds a loving, ordinary home. The reports keep coming anyway, and after the third one the system takes Alma. To bring her home, Nadia will have to prove who is lying, and decide how many rules she is willing to break.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Child welfare · The false report · Family versus the record

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 The novel opens with a gray rabbit on a rug three feet from Nadia, and no one bending to pick it up. Why do you think the story begins with that small failure instead of the removal itself?

02 Nadia reminds herself that a neat home is not innocence any more than a bare cupboard is guilt. What did you notice first in the Varela apartment, and what did you trust?

03 The first caller claims to be an educator at Alma's school, and the daycare says no one there made a report. Why does a claimed job title carry so much weight in the system?

04 Lucia tells her mother, "It does not have to be true, Mamá. It only has to be said." How did that line shape the way you read the rest of the book?

05 Readers learn early that the landlord, Karen Brennan, is making the calls. Did knowing the answer before Nadia did make the story more suspenseful for you, or less?

Nadia Cole

06 Nadia freezes during the removal and never picks up Conejo. After the last chapter, how did your understanding of that moment change?

07 When Nadia finally traces the calls, it takes a database query and four minutes, and the answer had been in the system since the first call. How do you judge a caring caseworker who still followed the system's habits?

08 Destiny Williams, the girl Nadia knew as a young CASA volunteer, is never far from her mind. Is Nadia fighting for Alma, for Destiny, or can it honestly be both?

09 Patricia Okafor tells Nadia, "I believe you. Now prove it, so the system believes you too." Did that feel like support to you, or like one more wall Nadia had to climb?

10 Darius, the Sunday dinners in South Shore, and Ruth the cat give Nadia a life outside her caseload. What do they offer her that the work never can?

Lucia, Alma, and the Yellow Room

11 After the removal, Lucia keeps the apartment exactly as Alma left it, but she carries Conejo to her own pillow. Why do you think she lets the room wait but keeps the rabbit close?

12 The Morrison home is clean, licensed, and rated excellent, and Alma stops drawing and then stops talking. What frightened you most about the yellow room, given that nothing in it looks like abuse on paper?

13 Janet Morrison says, "The nightlight is a crutch, and a child who leans on a crutch never learns to stand." Do you think Janet believes she is helping Alma, and does her belief matter?

14 When Alma answers, "I eat what she gives me," Nadia hears Janet's sentence in a four-year-old's voice. What does it take for an adult's words to replace a child's own?

15 Sandra Hayes, the CASA volunteer, watches Alma's drawings shrink and then stop, and she keeps bringing the crayons anyway. Why is a missing drawing so much harder for a system to see than a bruise?

16 Lucia tells Dr. Kwan she is sleeping when she is not. Can anyone be fully honest in therapy when what they say might help decide whether they get their child back?

17 In parenting class, Tanya tells Lucia that every form says temporary, and that eleven months is temporary on the form. What did Tanya teach Lucia that no class could?

Karen and the People Around the Case

18 Karen wants the building empty because it would sell for four hundred thousand dollars more. Does knowing her motive make her more frightening to you, or less?

19 Karen works hard not to think about the child she is hurting. Do you believe she truly thinks she has done nothing wrong?

20 David Kessler sets the three-report condition because of a case he once closed and regretted. How can a lesson learned from tragedy turn into a source of new harm?

21 Michael Webb, two years in with thirty-four cases of his own, is the one who carries Alma out. How much responsibility does a young worker carry when saying no could cost him his job?

22 Judge Chen calls the new evidence compelling, then says "However," and gives the department fourteen more days. Were you angrier at Chen, at the request for more time, or at the system that made fourteen days seem reasonable?

23 Marisol Ruiz has her own family history with a false report. Does that history make her a better lawyer for Lucia, or a riskier one?

Choices With No Right Answer

24 Patricia warns Nadia not to physically stop the removal, so she will still be inside the agency to help. Would you have stood aside?

25 Ana Rodriguez comes to the Morrison home in a separate car with her own notes, as a witness and not an ally. Why might a witness who could disagree with you be worth more than one who already agrees?

26 Only when Alma whispers "No" to the question of whether she feels safe does the case finally move. What does it say that a four-year-old had to say it out loud first?

27 Rosa takes Alma in, and in doing so puts her name into state records after thirty years of staying off them. Should Nadia have spelled out that risk, even if it cost the family that moment of relief?

28 While suspended, Nadia texts a seventeen-year-old the address of a GED testing center. Was that a small kindness, a real breach, or both, and does the difference matter?

The Ending

29 In the courthouse hallway, Nadia decides Lucia's victory was "luck wearing the clothes of justice." Is that fair to everyone who worked so hard to bring Alma home?

30 Tanya did everything the system asked and still loses her three children in the same week Lucia wins. Why do you think the novel places her in that hallway?

31 Back home, Alma asks “Can I?” before she eats, and her first new drawing is the yellow room in green crayon. Did you find Alma’s homecoming hopeful, heartbreaking, or both?

32 Lisa Ferrante approves Nadia’s emergency recommendation and later sits at the table that suspends her for thirty days. How can both decisions make sense to the same institution?

33 The last chapter reveals that Nadia was once a foster child who said “I want to go home” and was never written down. Did that revelation feel earned to you, and what earlier moments did it change?

34 The book ends with Nadia knocking on a new door, where a six-year-old named Devon lives. What do you think she carries with her into that apartment?

Beyond the Book

35 The title, Failure to Protect, is a legal phrase. Who in this story fails to protect Alma, and does the title point at anyone you did not expect?

36 Has a record, a form, or a first impression ever said something about you or your family that was not true? How did this book change the way you think about what gets written down?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Take a vote: ask each member to name the moment they first believed Alma was unsafe, then talk about what evidence each of you would have needed before acting.
- Hold a short debate on the three-report condition, with one side arguing Kessler’s view and the other arguing Patricia’s.
- Rewrite one scene together: replay the removal in Chapter Twelve as if Nadia crosses the three feet and picks up Conejo, and talk about what changes and what does not.
- Serve rice and beans, the meal Lucia sets out at her kitchen table, and leave one chair empty for Conejo.