A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Killing Vows

A novel · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

The bride at Ashford House has spent nineteen years entering rooms under names that are not hers. Tonight she has married Julian Ashford, a wealthy and adoring man, because the wedding gets her inside the estate for one night and one job. Then the night begins to adjust to her moves before she makes them.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Performance and identity | Control and its illusion | Who is really authoring the plan

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

35 questions in 6 parts. Choose the ones that spark your group, or work through them in order.

First Impressions

01 The novel opens with the bride locating “all three valets before I let anyone see my face.” What did that first line tell you about her, and when did you realize what she really was?

02 She never tells us her real name. Why do you think the book keeps her nameless, and did that make her easier or harder to know?

03 She calls warmth “a tool” that she keeps “sharp and in a drawer.” Did you find yourself rooting for her anyway, and how did that feel?

04 During the vows, Julian’s smile “did not reach the rest of his face” for one breath, and she puts it down to nerves. Which early warnings did you catch, and which did you explain away along with her?

05 Chapter Sixteen admits, “I came to this house to kill a man.” How did that line change the way you read everything before it?

The Bride at Work

06 Julian remembers the oxblood boathouse, a detail from her cover story that she never told him. What did you think when that happened, and why does she let it pass?

07 Coyle, her broker of nine years, "took my first number and said thank you." Why does an easy yes from a trusted partner turn out to be such a dangerous clue?

08 She spends much of the night fixed on the conspicuous watcher at the edge of the room. Why is it easier to fear a stranger than the person holding your hand?

09 Peter Loew tells her, "I am the least valuable thing in this house," placed in the good chair so someone like her would climb to him. How did learning he was bait change the stakes for you?

10 She tells Julian about a boat named for her mother and keeps the name to herself, and he answers "Margaret." Why does one small name prove more than every other clue?

11 Is the bride's vanity her strength or her weakness, and where does it cost her the most?

Ada

12 Ada brings the bride a cup of milky tea and says, "Somebody ought to be glad for you." Why do you think the book gives its kindest moment to the woman who will die for being in the way?

13 The bride reads Ada as "kind, all the way to the bottom," and still sets the stair to take her. Was this the moment you stopped rooting for the bride, or did you keep reading for other reasons?

14 Afterward she tells us, "Convenience is enough." Does anything in the rest of the book answer that line, and should anything?

15 Ada says the bride has "a look of my Ruth," the daughter she lost eleven years ago. How did that detail change the weight of what follows?

16 The linen maid, Ada, and Hart, the server who wanted out, all work in the service corridors. What does the book say about the people who make a wealthy family's party run?

Julian and the Trap

17 When the bride springs her crossed-arms toast, a clean third flute appears for Julian. How did you feel when you realized he had seen her trap coming before she built it?

18 Julian is the groom, the opponent and, she decides, “the better machine.” Was he the most dangerous person in the house, or was someone more dangerous standing behind him?

19 The bride concludes, “There was only one contract in this room, and it had my name on it.” Which clue did you notice in hindsight that you missed the first time?

20 Julian strikes during a romantic dip on the dance floor, she strikes back, and the guests applaud. What does that scene say about how much a crowd sees and how little it understands?

21 Julian’s weakness is “the pause,” his need to watch understanding land on her face. Is that vanity, pride in his work, or something closer to love?

22 In the final embrace he whispers, “I wondered when you’d stop performing.” Who was performing more that night, and who was more honest?

The Ending

23 She tells Julian, “I know exactly what you built,” and uses the pause it buys her to kill him with her ring. Did the ending feel inevitable, surprising, or both?

24 To survive, she gives up the gray wrap and lets a hundred people learn her face. Why is being seen the one thing she could never bear before tonight?

25 As she breathes into the man she has just killed, she admits, “I have counterfeited a great many feelings in my life.” What did the guests’ grief for “the poor little bride” make you feel?

26 In the mirror she understands that “winning had cost me the only thing I was.” What exactly has she lost, and is it a loss you can pity?

27 She rides away in an Ashford car, “alive” and “not safe.” Who do you think really commissioned her death, and what happens to her after the last page?

28 The last lines set the wedding vow she killed with against the one she broke: “lose clean before you win ugly.” What do the two vows mean to you?

Beyond the Book

29 The whole story takes place over a single wedding night. How did that pressure shape your reading experience?

30 How does a wedding, a ritual of trust, work as the setting for a story about deception?

31 Would this story work with a different narrator, such as Julian, Ada or the sharp-eyed aunt? Why or why not?

32 Julian built the whole night “out of the woman in my file.” Have you ever felt someone knew you only from your habits, and how much of a person can a file really hold?

33 She insists “Nothing in me needed steadying,” yet a door in her head will not stay shut. What do you think that ungoverned thing is?

34 Have you ever admired someone’s skill while hating what they used it for? Where did this book put you on that line?

35 Who was the most dangerous person at Ashford House, and who was the most innocent?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Toast with whatever your group would serve at a wedding, then vote on the exact moment the night stopped being the bride’s.
- Make a pot of milky, sweet tea in Ada’s honor and talk about her before you talk about anyone else.
- Run a clue hunt: each member brings one early detail they now see as a warning, and the group ranks them from most to least fair.
- Cast it: choose actors for the bride, Julian, Ada and Peter Loew, and defend your picks.
- Rewrite one scene out loud: Ada is not on the stair. How does the bride reach the wing, and do you see her differently?