A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Collector

The Death Row Sessions, Book Three · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

Elliot Marsh is asked for by name to write the memoir of Gideon Roe, a mild estate-clearance man on death row for a murder everyone believes is closed. Then Elliot finds Roe's real life's work: two hundred cartons labeled with the names and towns of strangers, a private archive of other people's crimes, kept for the quiet satisfaction of being the only one who knows.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Withheld answers · Custody mistaken for love · Who keeps the truth

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 book opens with Elliot squaring three spines and finding a clear foot of shelf beside them: "There is room along there for one more." What did that empty space make you expect, and did the ending answer it?

02 Samaira moved out over two years ago, yet Elliot's hands still take down two cups every morning. What do his small, repeated habits tell you about him before the case even begins?

03 Roe examines the recorder before he asks a single thing about Elliot, then says, "And who keeps yours?" How did that question land the first time, and what did it mean to you by the last chapter?

04 In his confession Roe says the young man "had come into his keeping and he had not managed it well." When did you first suspect the tidy, eighty-minute confession was hiding something?

05 The novel moves between Elliot's present and the pages of Roe's memoir. Which voice did you trust more as you read, and did that change?

Gideon Roe and His Keeping

06 The Ardley daughter tells Roe to burn her father's diaries, and he keeps them instead, calling it keeping them well. Was that a rescue or a theft, and at what point did his "care" stop looking like care to you?

07 Roe admits that "a postcard would do it," two lines that could have ended Faye Brandt's waiting, and he even counted her nine hundred and eighty-eight Sundays. What does it say about him that he never sent it?

08 Roe tells Elliot that "a collection searched is a collection destroyed." What exactly is he afraid of losing, and is it anything like what the families have lost?

09 Roe calls the stay petition "good paper," then caps the pen and hands it back. Why do you think he chose execution over a search that might have saved his life?

10 Roe was very likely wrongly convicted of killing Toby Wren, yet his own memoir admits killings he was never charged with. How do you hold both facts at once, and what would justice for him have looked like?

11 Roe says "I am in good hands" to Elliot and again on the execution table. Who or what do you think he meant each time?

Elliot Marsh

12 Seven years after his book helped Martin Sligh win parole, and Dana Frey opened her door to him, Elliot is still haunted. How does that old failure shape the way he handles Roe and the clemency packet?

13 When Elliot describes his new ledger, Samaira asks, "Who is that for?" How would you have answered her on his behalf at that moment, and how would you answer at the end?

14 Elliot makes a card for the motel desk clerk after she tells him about her father, and she pulls back with "You ask like the insurance man." Why is this small scene such a turning point for him?

15 Roe predicts, "You will do this again for somebody, and you will call it the work, and it will not be the work." Was he right about Elliot, and could Elliot still prove him wrong?

16 When Elliot finally puts Samaira's cup away at the back of the cupboard with the handle turned in to the wall, is he letting her go or keeping her?

17 Have you ever held on to a letter, a secret, or a memory partly for the pleasure of being the only one who had it? Where do you draw the line between privacy and hoarding?

The Families Left Waiting

18 Faye lays a place at Sunday dinner and renews Nell's library card every September, and she told a reporter that whether Nell was alive "was not what the plate was for." What do you think the plate was for?

19 When Elliot warns Faye that an answer may be very small, she says, "Small is a long way past what I have." Do families deserve the truth even when it can only hurt them?

20 In Faye's kitchen, the single earring confirms that the things Roe kept were Nell's, and then Faye washes the third plate and puts it in the rack. What did that scene do to you, and why do you think it works so quietly?

21 Right after the kitchen scene, a man searching for his brother leaves Elliot a voicemail, and "two sentences would give him the town." Why do you think Elliot never calls back, and how did it change your judgment of him?

22 Outside the execution room, Toby Wren's employer holds his work gloves and says, "He'd have finished that bathroom in a day." Why do you think the book gives him the last human exchange after Roe dies?

23 Later Faye frames the jacket receipt where the plate used to stand and decides to call the sergeant that same day. What does she choose to keep, and how is her keeping different from Roe's?

The Twists

24 The storage gate log, the cord, and a traffic warning slowly point away from Roe and toward Dale Ferris. Which clue convinced you, and had you suspected another man before the book named him?

25 Elliot finds his own name on a county sign-in sheet in a hand that is not his, twenty-two days before he had heard of Gideon Roe. Which discovery about the Program unsettled you most?

26 Iris Vann tells Elliot, "Steered is a fair word," admitting that his three assignments were arranged. How did that change the way you think about the first two Death Row Sessions books?

27 The courier receipts end at eighty-nine, a count that includes two cards Elliot wrote himself and never put on tape. Do you read the Program as a surveillance operation, something stranger, or both?

28 Roe says he knew only "the shape" of whatever has been keeping Elliot, not who owns it. Did you want more answers about the Program, or does the mystery work better left open?

Choices With No Right Answer

29 Elliot withdraws the entire clemency packet, reasoning that a wider search would scatter the archive before Faye could hear anything, and says of Nell's page, "That's the one that's mine." Was this a sacrifice, a theft, or both?

30 Elliot cuts the fourteen lines that explain how the shelving stands and hides them face down in a drawer. In his place, would you have handed the full key to the sergeant, knowing what it might cost?

31 Twice Elliot answers, "He talked about houses," a true sentence that hides almost everything. Is a lie made of true words better or worse than an ordinary lie?

32 The sergeant says that answer makes her hear "somebody who's counted the cost of the other answer." What cost do you think Elliot was counting, and was he right to count it?

The Ending and Beyond

33 The private shed is found swept clean while the county's cartons stay sealed, and Elliot remembers handing the courier a drive with the whole county run on it. Who do you think emptied the shed?

34 The book's last line is "Dale Ferris asked for you by name," and Elliot has already put fresh batteries in the recorder. Will he go, and should he?

35 Who is the collector of the title: Roe, Elliot, the Program, or someone else entirely?

36 If you could ask Elliot one question after the last page, what would it be, and what single act would convince you he had finally chosen care over keeping?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Bring one object from home that carries a story, and share the story. Then ask the group: who should keep it after you?
- Hold a vote on Roe's guilt, with two ballots: was he guilty of killing Toby Wren, and was he guilty of what he did with the collection? Compare the results.

- Stage a short debate on the clemency packet. One side argues Elliot should have filed it, the other that he was right to withdraw it for Faye's sake.
- Rewrite one scene: Elliot returns the brother's voicemail. Have each member say aloud the two sentences he could have spoken, and talk about what changes.
- Set an extra place at your table for the meeting, and at the end talk about who in your own life you would keep a place for.
