A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Girl Who Named Herself

A novel · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

Every night, Jaime signs a nursing-home visitor ledger and sits with Lorene, the adoptive mother who made her childhood a misery. Lorene no longer knows her, and no one else comes. Long ago, in a Chicago police station, a small girl with nothing took the name of the one adult who was kind to her. Decades later, with a husband, a son, and a life she built herself, Jaime must decide what can finally be spoken.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Survival and chosen identity · Memory and forgiveness · Breaking the silence

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 visitor ledger ruled for a whole family, with only Jaime's name in it. Why do you think the story begins with that empty column instead of with her childhood?

02 Jaime keeps one answer ready for when Glenn asks why she visits every night: "No one else would." Why is that answer true but not the whole truth?

03 Neighbors leave food where Jaime and Danny can find it, and the food asks nothing of them. Why does help like that matter so much to a child, and what does it say about the adults who never came closer?

04 The chapters move between The Present at Lorene's bedside and The Past. How did the two timelines speak to each other for you, and which one was harder to read?

Jaime and Her Name

05 In the police station, a tall officer gives a frightened girl a sandwich and asks nothing in return, and the girl keeps the officer's name. What does choosing your own name give a child who has nothing else?

06 Later, a fearless woman on a television screen gives Jaime the spelling, along with an imagined strong arm, fast legs, and sharp hearing. Why do you think she needed both women to make the name her own?

07 When a nursing-home clerk misreads her signature as a soft, ordinary name, Jaime feels a moment of relief before she corrects it. Have you ever wished, even briefly, to step out of your own name or story?

08 The two words "Don't tell" follow Jaime from the first house all the way to her kitchen table as a grown woman. How does silence protect her, and what does it cost her?

09 At the end Jaime sets the name down "the way you set down a thing you are finished needing." Did that choice feel like a loss to you, or like a freedom?

The Houses She Was Sent To

10 At the institution, a sister tells Jaime plainly that she is too ugly to be chosen. How do the things adults say to children become the facts children believe about themselves?

11 Emmett kneels on the porch to meet her eyes and later tells her, "I love you as a daughter," yet Lorene's cruelty returns whenever his truck is gone. How do you weigh Emmett's kindness against what he did not stop?

12 At Thanksgiving, Edith sees Jaime hide bread in her waistband and offers her more instead of shaming her. Which small kindness in Jaime's childhood mattered most to you?

13 Lorene makes a show of buying the ugliest purple cloth, and Jaime sews a skirt she is proud of and vows to learn color better than anyone. Can a person be proud of something born out of humiliation?

14 When the aides admire the painting she made for Lorene's room and ask how she matched the color by eye, Jaime says only, "Because I can." Why does she owe no one the story behind her skill?

15 When Emmett collapses, Lorene tells everyone Jaime killed him, and at the funeral Jaime sits in the back, where she is put. How can a lie punish someone without ever reaching a courtroom?

16 Years later, Lorene throws the same sentence at her from the bed, and this time the cup in Jaime's hand stays perfectly steady. What had changed in Jaime, and what had not?

Danny, Rose, and the Past

17 Jaime saves her bread for Danny at the institution even though he has hurt her. How can a child love and fear the same person?

18 Lorene insists Rose never existed. Why does Jaime need someone else to confirm that her baby sister was real?

19 Danny comes back as a teenager, confirms there was a baby, and then attacks Jaime at the pool. How did that scene change what you hoped for from their reunion?

20 Jaime separates what she saw, what the old newspaper says, and what Jay tells her, and holds herself to the word charged instead of convicted. Why does that care with the truth matter so much to her as a narrator?

21 Gene, now an old man, tells Jaime he bought the stuffed dog for her with his own money. Why does that revelation reach her in a way Lorene's confession never does?

Glenn and the Life She Built

22 At thirteen, Jaime hears a boy play guitar and announces she will marry him. Years later, Glenn passes her a steak through a barely opened car window. What makes him different from the other men in her life?

23 Jaime buys a wedding dress with the hundred dollars she saved for years to escape through Ricky, then wears it to marry Glenn. What does it mean to reclaim something meant for another life?

24 Glenn's hand stops just short of her hair, and he teaches himself to say he loves her while leaving one word out, never knowing why. What does that kind of patience ask of a partner, and was it fair to him?

25 When the calls and threats begin, Jaime keeps a log of every ring beside a telephone trace, and the record holds. Why is that victory so satisfying for a woman who survived by staying invisible?

26 Jaime gives her business a name with Rose in it, so she can say her sister's name every day without anyone knowing. What does it mean to carry someone you lost into ordinary life?

Choices With No Right Answer

27 Jaime considers marrying Ricky, who hurt her, because he looks like the only way out of Lorene's house. How did you feel about that choice, and what does it say about the doors open to her?

28 An aide tells her she does not have to come every night, and Jaime signs in again the very next evening. Do you see her visits as strength, habit, love, or something else, and would you have kept going?

29 When Lorene, not knowing her, confesses she was eaten alive with jealousy of "the girl," Jaime neither corrects her nor takes her hand. Was her silence right?

30 Jaime says, "A reason is not a repair." Does understanding why someone hurt you change anything about what you owe them?

31 Jaime insists that coming every night does not make her better than those who stayed away. Is it possible to care for someone who harmed you without forgiving them?

The Ending and Beyond

32 Lorene dies between visits, alone, with no last reconciliation. Did you want a different ending for the two of them, and why do you think the story withholds one?

33 Jaime finally tells Glenn everything through things a person can hold in a hand. Why tell it that way, and what did it mean to you that "the table had held, and so had he"?

34 Jaime wants it said plainly that telling Glenn did not cure her. Why does she insist on that, and what did the telling do instead?

35 The novel is inspired by true events, and it opens with a note to the reader about what it portrays. Did knowing that change the way you read it?

36 If you are comfortable, share the story behind your own name, or a name you might have chosen for yourself. What does this book suggest about the difference between the names we are given and the names we make?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Go around the room and share, if you are comfortable, the story behind your own name or a nickname you chose.
- Hold a vote: which small kindness in the book mattered most, the neighbors' food, the officer's sandwich, Edith's bread, the bridal-shop owner's "sale," or Gene's dog? Then talk about why the quiet ones hit hardest.

- Rewrite one scene together: imagine the night Lorene confesses her jealousy, and Jaime tells her who is sitting in the chair. Talk about what that would have gained and what it would have cost.
- Bring a single color you love, a scarf, a mug, a photo on your phone, and talk about Jaime's promise to learn color so that no color could ever be turned against her again.
