A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Ones She Sat With

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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Elliot Marsh's new subject is Delsia Angel, a hospice and ICU nurse the public calls an angel of mercy, now on death row for three patient murders. She is warm, observant, and easy to believe, and her memoir is full of frightened families and hands held at the end. Yet every story she tells leads back to the exact moment a life ended.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Mercy and its counterfeit | Performance of feeling | The intimacy of dying

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 Elliot takes the job because he thinks "this one is safe," a closed case about a woman the world has already forgiven. What did you make of his reasoning, and when did you first doubt it?

02 A guard says that after sitting all night with Ramos, Delsia came off the corridor "Like she'd fed." How did that one word color everything that followed?

03 At their first session Delsia says an old man "went at four-eleven in the morning." Why did that exact minute bother Elliot, and when did it start to bother you?

04 A cashier tells Elliot that Delsia held her mother's hand for eleven days at Fairview. Can a person's kindness be real and still serve a darker hunger?

05 Iris Vann knows Elliot is "always home by nine on Thursdays" and wants raw audio instead of a book. What did you think the client wanted at that point?

Delsia Angel

06 Delsia says that sitting at her grandmother's bedside "felt like being real," and that she did not wake her parents because "I didn't want to miss it." What did you make of that eight-year-old?

07 Delsia tells her grandmother's winter twice, first as the place she learned to be gentle and later with the part she kept back. How did the second telling change the first?

08 Delsia can name the minute of a death faster than the name of the person who died. What does that imbalance tell you about what she valued?

09 Delsia keeps a dying father alive through a weekend so his son can arrive from overseas. Was that a gift to the family, or a sign of how much control she wanted?

10 By the last hospital, Delsia says, she had grown "very good at sending families home." When is it kind to send exhausted relatives away, and when does it become theft?

11 Delsia tells Elliot, "I only ever went where I was needed." How did that sentence sound to you the first time, and how did it sound by the end?

12 Delsia says, "A courtroom is the biggest room I was ever the one in," and that she told her story "so that they would all come and sit." Did her reason for the trial surprise you?

Elliot Marsh

13 Elliot hears himself on tape warming his voice for a guard's complaint about his knees, and it works. Is performed warmth still kindness if the other person is truly comforted?

14 Elliot builds a love story to explain Delsia's silence about Dr. Cope, then admits "The love was a story I had written for her." Why are we so quick to supply a romantic motive?

15 Elliot reads the clinical expert's report and renames the slow deaths as patience. Have you ever read evidence for what it gives you instead of what it says?

16 Elliot begins to find Delsia's voice restful and catches himself leaning toward the page the way she leaned toward the beds. When did you first notice the change in him?

17 Samaira ends things after learning a private call was recorded and used, saying it felt like everything had been said "into a room with someone else in it." Was hers the right line to draw?

Dr. Cope and the Program

18 The defense that turned Delsia into an angel of mercy was “built like naval architecture.” How much does a persuasive story depend on who builds it, and why?

19 Elliot’s two columns show Delsia’s deaths timed to the minute and the money deaths left vague, while the estate papers are exact to the cent. What did that contrast reveal for you?

20 In the prison lot, Dr. Cope talks about men who work alone and can be “a good while gone before anyone thinks to wonder where he got to.” Is that a threat, and how could Elliot ever prove it?

21 Elliot takes a pill from a clinic Cope recommended and nearly dies on his kitchen floor, and on the tile he is “not afraid.” Which frightened you more, the dose or his calm?

22 Cope is charged, released on his own recognizance, and drives off laughing with a woman waiting in his car. How did that scene make you feel about justice in this book?

The Twists

23 The uncharged fourth death Delsia offered Elliot turns out to be a natural death she never touched. Why would someone claim a death that was not hers?

24 Elliot comes to see that Delsia kept three patients alive past their time so she could be there when they went. When did you begin to suspect the mercy story was upside down?

25 Delsia’s price for the truth is Elliot in the chair at her execution: “That was always the price.” What was Elliot really paying?

26 Elliot copies only the after-silences onto a private drive with a false label. Why do you think that recording became the thing he could not give up?

The Families

27 The Captain’s family keeps a thank-you card that reads “You gave us him a little longer” beside the bus ticket he bought to meet his grandchild. What does that ticket tell you about who he was?

28 Elliot tells the son that the Captain’s last words were invented. Was that truth a kindness, a cruelty, or both, and would you have told him?

29 The widow straightens the card and leaves it up, saying, “He still bought the ticket.” Did she make the right choice for her family?

30 When Elliot breaks the news, the family answers by insisting on the man himself, his wrong grammar and his tuneless singing. What do we owe the dead beyond the story of how they died?

The Ending and Beyond

31 Delsia dies looking at Elliot through the glass, glad, and he does not look away. By the end, who was sitting with whom?

32 Elliot hands the evidence to a prosecutor and lets Delsia's mercy book "die in a drawer." Do good actions count if the person doing them no longer feels anything?

33 In the cafe, Elliot leans toward a stranger's grief, "close enough to be mistaken for a man about to offer comfort." What does that scene suggest about who he is becoming?

34 Elliot concludes, "I am the recording now." What do you think the program wanted from these sessions, and what might come next for him?

35 How is Delsia different from Peter Lund in The Unmissed, and how is she similar?

36 Did the book change how you think about the people who care for the dying, and about what real care at a bedside looks like?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Read Delsia's two tellings of her grandmother's winter aloud, the first memoir chapter and the later one, and talk about what changes when you hear them side by side.
- Take a vote: should Elliot have told the Captain's son the truth about the last words? Then ask the people who voted no what they would have said instead.
- If your group has read The Unmissed, make two quick lists on the spot, one for Peter and one for Delsia, of what each wanted from Elliot, and see where the lists overlap.
- Have each member rewrite the Captain's final hour as it might really have gone, with no invented words, and talk about what the family would have lost or gained.
- If anyone in the group has been with someone at the end of life, and wants to share, talk about what real care at a bedside looks like.