A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Privilege

The Hollowell Moral Thriller, Book One · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

Chicago therapist Dr. Elena Vargas hears a patient confess to a fatal hit-and-run. Three days later, the victim's mother is referred to her as a new patient. Every Tuesday, the mother searches for the truth. Every Thursday, the killer makes sure it stays buried. The law says Elena cannot tell either of them what she knows.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Therapist-patient privilege | The duty to warn | A mother's grief | Moral dilemma

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 Thomas confesses in his third session, after two sessions about work stress and insomnia. Why do you think he needed to tell anyone at all, and why a therapist rather than his wife, a lawyer or a priest?

02 Elena believes therapist-patient privilege is sacred because without it no one would tell the truth in therapy. Did the novel change what you think about that rule?

03 Thomas says what haunts him is "the speed of it," a decision made in two or three seconds. Is a choice made that quickly still a choice, and does the speed make it more or less forgivable?

04 Elena says yes to Dr. Patel's referral even though she knows any ethics board would tell her to refer Diane out. Why do you think she said yes, and would anything have made you say yes?

05 Margaret tells Elena, "You took it because you need her." Was Margaret right, and can help that partly serves the helper still be real help?

Elena in the Chair

06 Diane asks whether they will ever find who did it, and Elena answers “I hope so.” Why does that small answer, rather than any larger lie, become the thing Diane cannot forgive?

07 Elena keeps seeing Thomas after she suspects he is watching Diane, telling herself that without the sessions she would be blind. Was staying the protective choice or the dangerous one?

08 Elena’s body carries the secret: bitten nails, lost sleep, shaking hands under the notepad. Did her suffering make you more sympathetic to her, and does suffering change how responsible she is?

09 Father Brennan tells the story of a parishioner who made the same confession every Saturday for three years, and the word “enabling” hits Elena like a fist. Have you ever made it too comfortable for someone to avoid changing?

10 When Elena finally calls Reina, she tells him she is giving him “the map,” and he still has to build the case without her. How much credit does Elena deserve for the arrest?

11 Elena’s daily salad, her decaf, her cat Freud and her amber lamp fill the early chapters. Why do you think the book spends so much time on ordinary routines in a story about a death?

Thomas and the People Around Him

12 How did the novel make you feel about Thomas over time? Did you ever feel sympathy for him, and did that surprise you?

13 Thomas says that covering his tracks with the bumper and the alibi is “not guilt. That’s strategy.” Can a person’s remorse be real while he keeps protecting himself from its consequences?

14 Thomas tells Elena, “We’re partners, Elena. Remember that.” What makes that word so frightening, and was there any truth in it?

15 When Elena asks if he is threatening Diane, Thomas says, “I’m expressing concern.” Margaret says his words do not meet the legal threshold. Who was right, and should the law care about what we hear between the lines?

16 Katherine leaves Thomas a glass of water every night and texted him “Drive safe, it’s pouring” on the night Ryan died. How did her small kindnesses change the way you felt about his secret?

17 Mark Devlin agreed to say “ten fifteen” because Thomas told him it was “an insurance thing.” How guilty is a friend who repeats a story without asking questions?

18 When Thomas is arrested, Reina reads his face as “Terrible, exhausted relief.” What do you think Thomas felt in that moment, and is relief any kind of remorse?

Diane and Ryan

19 Diane describes grief as standing “in a house where all the lights have gone out.” Which images of grief in the book stayed with you most?

20 Ryan never appears alive, yet we learn he sorted his baseball cards by ERA, called his mother every Sunday at six, and drew neighborhood plans on graph paper. Which detail made him real for you?

21 Ryan’s unsent letter says, “Let me take care of you for a while.” Why do you think Diane says the letter finally gave her loss edges?

22 Diane knocks on doors, puts up flyers, and installs the doorbell camera that Thomas calls “a problem.” Was her search healthy, dangerous, or both, and what would you have done in her place?

23 In the confrontation, Diane tells Elena, “You don’t get to therapist me anymore.” What is Diane taking back in that moment?

24 Diane thanks Elena for the call and still says, “I don’t forgive you.” Can gratitude and refusal live side by side, and did Elena deserve either one?

The Cost of Speaking

25 Margaret tells the story of David Hersh, who kept a confidence and then had to live with the assault that followed. Did that story make you more or less certain about what Elena should do?

26 Margaret will not give Elena permission to break privilege: “You face it alone.” Was she being a good friend, a good supervisor, or neither?

27 The board revokes Elena’s license and allows her to reapply in two years. Was that outcome fair, too harsh, or too light for what she did?

28 Elena trades her leather chair on Armitage for a plastic chair at a clinic on Western Avenue, under a poster that says HEALING IS A JOURNEY. Is her new life a punishment, a second chance, or something else?

29 Marcus tells Elena, “The worst part is knowing I chose it.” Why do you think the book gives that line to a young clinic patient, and which other characters could have said it?

30 In the last chapter, Elena names what she carries now: “Not the secret. The yes.” Do you agree that saying yes to Dr. Patel was her real mistake?

The Ending and Beyond

31 Diane writes that the magnolia bloomed, and that Ryan called blooming before you are ready “brave.” What does the magnolia mean to Diane, and what does it mean to Elena?

32 In the final pages a new intake arrives, referred by Fisk, Hartley & Associates, and Elena thinks, “Not a coincidence. A move.” How did that last turn change the way you felt about the ending?

33 The four parts are called The Weight, The Trap, The Break and The Cost. Which part was hardest to read, and which title fits your own experience of the book best?

34 Have you ever kept a secret that someone else had a right to know? How did you decide when keeping it had become wrong?

35 The novel asks what it costs to do the right thing when every option causes harm. Did Elena find a right thing to do, and would you have done it sooner?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Serve decaf coffee and Elena’s daily lunch: a spinach salad with walnuts and dried cranberries, dressing on the side.
- Before the meeting, have each member write down the exact moment they would have acted, then reveal and compare the answers together.
- Hold a mock licensing hearing: three members sit as the board, one speaks for Elena, one for the profession, and the group votes on her license.
- Rewrite one scene out loud: Elena says no to Dr. Patel’s referral. How does the rest of the story change?