A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Proxy

The Final Say, Book One · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

Eleanor Whitcomb's papers name her son, Russell, as the one who decides her care. He says she wanted to die. Then, one letter at a time with only her eyes, Eleanor spells: if they tell you I wanted to die they are lying. Hospital ethicist Teresa Nowicki can advise and ask for time, but she cannot sign a single order, and the seventy-two-hour clock has started.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

- Who decides when a patient cannot
- Family loyalty and suspicion
- The limits of an ethicist's power

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 The book opens with Russell crying "without making a sound" at his mother's bed, and Teresa moves the tissues within his reach. How did you feel about him in that first chapter, and how much of that feeling survived?

02 Eleanor spells her sentence one letter at a time, and on the second THEY her daughter says, "Delirium." Was Maya's reading reasonable at the time, and what did you make of her saying it over her mother?

03 In the first chapter Teresa's fingers find the hearing aids in Russell's coat pocket, and when Maya explains she gave them to him to hold, Teresa says nothing. Would you have spoken up, and what did that silence cost?

04 Before the seventy-two hours are two hours old, a hospice calls to confirm "the bed reserved at 10:40 last night." At what point were you sure about Russell, and did that certainty hold?

05 Under the brass plaque hangs Eleanor's own card: "Families are not visitors." How does the book turn the rule she fought for against her?

06 Every so often a single italic line speaks for Eleanor: "I moved my toes. Can't you see me?" "My ears are cold." In the book's last part those lines stop. What did hearing her do to you, and what did her silence at the end mean?

Russell

07 Russell does nothing the hospital can prove is wrong: he signs the trial, asks for the hospital's copy "so nobody says I wrote it," and thanks nurses by name. How did the author make lawful acts feel so threatening?

08 Russell carries flowers down to the ED and reads Yusra's badge aloud: "Yusra. Thank you, Yusra." Was this gratitude, intimidation, or both, and how could anyone have proved which?

09 In the chapel Russell finally says, "She told me not to call. She begged me. I sat on that floor with her." Is obeying a parent's wish in that moment loyalty, neglect, or something the law has no word for?

10 Russell later explains, "She said nobody sees. Every week. I kept them out." Did three years of obedience make him a devoted son, a dangerous one, or both?

11 Through the gap in the curtain, Teresa watches Russell pin his mother's hair the way she wore it to Mass, humming the entrance hymn and going flat on the same turn. What did that scene change in your view of him?

12 Russell's last message reads, "She told me at supper she'd keep me. Then she fell." Do you believe him, and does it change anything if Eleanor did tell him about the vote?

Maya and June

13 Maya's mother drove six hundred miles to her debate final, then left during her last speech. "She never stayed for the end of anything. At least this time she left instructions." How does that memory explain Maya's certainty about "Never"?

14 Maya tells her unconscious mother, "We've all agreed, Mom. It's time," while June stands in the doorway and says nothing. Why do you think June stayed silent?

15 June finally confesses, "I knew about the vote. I knew about the page. I finished my dinner." Which of the three siblings did you find hardest to forgive, and why?

16 About her half-past-seven call, Maya admits, "It wasn't the television. I knew." How does each sibling's private guilt shape the position they take about their mother's care?

17 June turns out to have been the sponsor who quietly paid for Maya's debate team, every year. What did that revelation add to your picture of the two sisters?

18 In the corridor, Maya says "Keep her on" and June says "Let her go." Which sister would you have stood beside, and why?

Teresa and the People Around Her

19 Teresa believes families deserve the truth first, so she tells Russell that an ED nurse had questions about the timeline. Was she wrong to tell him, or right in a world that used her honesty against her?

20 When Yusra asks "Is it true?" Teresa answers "Yes," and Yusra says, "I wanted to see if you'd lie to me too." Why does this moment matter so much to both women?

21 Yusra loses her badge for sitting with a patient after her shifts, and her visa leaves her sixty days to find another employer or leave the country. What does her story say about who pays for telling the truth?

22 Bridget tells Teresa, "He asked for me because you wouldn't stop my hands. I'm doing it anyway." How did you judge her, knowing she once watched Eleanor keep her own mother on a ventilator for a year?

23 Teresa's beloved mentor, Nate Greer, turns out to have been the ethicist in Pruett, who called a truthful son a liar. How did that discovery change the way you read Teresa's whole week?

24 Teresa told the story of Kieran, the boy whose fingers would "close on anyone's," only at her mother-in-law's sink, and Maya throws it back at her days later. Then Maya finds out what became of him: he woke months later, and he remembers hearing the nurse. How did that change the way you read Teresa's fight for Eleanor's sentence?

25 Teresa can advise and ask for time, but she cannot sign a single order. Is that limit on an ethicist wise, and did the book change your mind?

The Twists

26 The hearing aids are "lost," a loaner is canceled as "Pointless expense now," and at the end Russell says, "They were always here," and hands over a case with every light lit. What does it mean that someone docked it every night?

27 Page four of the directive, "get me help first. Decide later," was witnessed by June and never shown to Russell. How did that page change the weight of everything that happened before it?

28 Harold Pennock admits that Eleanor phoned him on Saturday: “Wrong. Try again, Harold.” She was keeping her son. Who in this family benefited from her silence, and which twist surprised you most?

29 At two in the morning Teresa finds a hospital bed going up in the Whitcomb kitchen, and the foreman says, “The son said leave that corner. We cleared round it.” Why is that image so chilling?

30 Dr. Sutter examines Eleanor in minutes, never opens a scan, and writes “Imaging reviewed.” That evening Teresa sees him laughing near Russell’s table at the foundation gala. What do you think he was doing there?

Choices With No Right Answer

31 To make sure “nothing happens at six,” Teresa goes to Donna and breaks her promise to June. Was breaking it right, and would you have done the same?

32 Nine-year-old Clara asks, “Did she? Choose?” and Teresa kneels and answers, “I don’t know, Clara.” Should she have given the child a softer answer, and what would you have said?

33 When the alarm sounds and Eleanor needs suction, Russell rings the bell before Teresa can reach it. What do you make of that small act from the man who wanted the ventilator off?

34 Colette says that until someone determines Eleanor is dying, “a fever is a fever,” yet she later backs the agent again. Is the law in this book a protection, an obstacle, or both?

The Ending and Beyond

35 As she buttons the cardigan around her mother, Maya says, “’They.’ Not ‘he.’” Who do you now think Eleanor meant, and were you persuaded?

36 Eleanor dies that night with her daughters holding her hands, after her son steps back out of the doorway. Did the ending feel right to you, or did you want another outcome?

37 In the last scene Teresa sees Adam’s crossed-out name on his form, then writes a name beginning with A on her own agent line. Who would you name, and does that person know what you want?

38 The series is called The Final Say. After this book, who do you think should have the final say when a patient cannot speak: the named agent, the doctors, the family, or someone else?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Before the meeting, have each member write down who would make medical decisions for them, and whether that person knows what they want. Share only what you are comfortable sharing.
- Try the letter board. One member silently picks a short sentence, and the group reads it letter by letter as that member points with their eyes only. Talk about how hard it was, and how much you would trust the result.
- Hold a vote: was Russell an obedient son or a son who used his mother's wishes? Vote again at the end of the meeting and see who changed their mind.
- Debate the ethics committee. Split into Maya's side, June's side, and the hospital's side, and argue what should happen at six o'clock on Thursday.
- Cast it. Who would play Teresa, Russell, Maya, June, and Yusra, and why?
