A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Record

The Meridian Files, Book Three · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

A man calls Rachel Adler's house late at night, calmly, so she will know his voice. Months later, a guardianship petition arrives built from nineteen true entries about her, many of them things she did to protect her daughter, offered to a judge as proof that she is not sound. Every entry is accurate, and her lawyer cannot dispute a single line.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Truth used as a weapon · Guardianship and control · A mother's vigilance

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 Wendell's first call holds no threat at all, only Gloria's hymn, the train song and Verna Pruitt. Why is a stranger's kindness so much harder for Rachel to report than a threat would have been?

02 He says he called "so the next time you hear it, it won't be a stranger's." How did that line sit with you on first reading, and how does it sit now?

03 From the squared stack of mail to the coin taste at 7:41, Rachel writes everything down. At what point, if ever, did you start to doubt her?

04 Rachel answers Lily's question about the call with "Nobody," the first sentence she could not stand behind in that house. Was keeping Lily out of it the right instinct?

Rachel

05 In the library reading room Rachel lays her own column beside two official notes about her and says, “Mine is the short one.” What did it mean to you that their record began before hers?

06 Every opening she drafts for her complaint reads as evidence against her, until she writes, “I believe something is being done to me, and the reason I believe it is the state I am in.” Could any wording have worked?

07 Rachel asks Lily what she carries into the house while a heating contractor kneels in the hall with a pen. Was that a reasonable fear, or a failure of trust?

08 For twenty-seven nights Rachel keeps swallowing capsules she knows are wrong, so that Hannah Weir can measure what is in her. Was that courage, or a risk she had no right to take?

09 Laying the enrollment pack beside the bundle, Rachel says, “There is nobody to accuse,” and then, “I am being processed.” How did the shift from a villain to a system change the fear the book gave you?

10 Karen tells Rachel about a float-pool conversion Rachel signed off twelve years ago, and when Rachel believes her, Karen says, “Doesn’t fix the floor.” Does that history change your sympathy for Rachel?

Lily

11 Lily ranks everything out of ten, and the worst thing that happens in her kitchen “doesn’t get a number.” What does her ranking habit tell you about how she gets through this year?

12 Wendell tells Lily, “You noticed that she’d stopped asking. That’s a different thing.” What breaks for her when she hears him say it, word for word, to a new girl, and did it break for you?

13 He answered Lily’s text about the long drive home with “That’s the harder half and most people can’t do it,” then sent the same sentence eleven days later. Was he recruiting her or grooming her, and is there a difference?

14 The two entries read out from “the minor child” are, Lily says, the only two true things she ever told anybody. Who betrayed whom in that moment?

15 Lily tells her mother, “You gave me the soft version of Cora,” and asks her to admit Wendell was right. Why does “He was right” matter more to Lily than “You were used”?

16 Lily keeps her own dated record in the back of her chemistry notebook: “I’m not asking you.” Has she inherited her mother’s strength, her mother’s danger, or both?

Wendell and the System

17 Wendell never breaks a law, answers to whatever name a resident gives him, and stands down the day Rachel hands him the order. Is he a villain, a true believer, or a good worker inside a bad machine?

18 On the bench by Bellhaven’s entrance he recites Rachel’s household, from the gate to the porch timer to the Ambervale envelopes, then says, “Lily told me.” How did that scene change the way you saw those walks to the train?

19 Wendell calls Corinne Merrick “the best I ever found” and says Lily is quicker. How did learning where Merrick came from change the way you understood the case that came before this book?

20 Rachel sums the scheme up in four words, “Rate. Supply. Observe. Enroll.” Have you ever trusted a star rating, for a care home or anything else, that you never checked in person?

21 “A building scores high when the people in it are settled and nobody comes to see them.” Who is the star on the wall really written for?

22 Marguerite Voss offers Rachel a seat on the panel and one more overnight aide at Bellhaven, if Cora James stays self-inflicted. “On paper,” Voss says. Would you have said no, and what would you have traded?

The People Around Her

23 Ben signs the petition out of grief, building it from the three questions he asked on every call. Is his document less harmful because he meant well?

24 Nowak refuses to sign Rachel’s statement, and she sees why: “I have been building my case out of people who love me.” What does the book say about whose word counts?

25 Kate Minyard charts every shift “as a letter to whoever asks in twenty years.” In a book about records used as weapons, is her record the one that saves Rachel?

26 Eileen Hargrove tells Nowak, “You’re grieving with your hands.” What is Nowak really doing on his drives to the seven names, and what does it cost him?

27 Imani Ellison, Lena Park, Yolanda and David Okonkwo each refuse, in their own way. “You people always come back,” David says. Which refusal did you understand best?

28 A careless remark of Nowak's reaches a paid caller through Karen as "She asks the same question twice in one week." How does the novel show damage traveling without anyone telling a lie?

The Hearing and the Ending

29 Haigh tells the judge that nothing read that morning is disputed as to fact. How can nineteen true entries still add up to a false story?

30 The assessment says a careful record of a real campaign and a careful record of a fear are "the same document in both cases." Do you agree?

31 Ben withdraws the petition, but the clerk explains that the filing stays on the docket for good. Did Rachel win?

32 Wendell is moving to Tarrant County, where he will be "Gil." What do you imagine happens to the next family he meets?

33 The book ends with Tavish gone, his radio carrying static, and GROVE still visible in the shape of the plate beside the frame. What does that last image say to you?

34 How has Rachel changed across the three Meridian books, and what has she lost along the way?

35 Have you ever been described accurately by a form, a chart or a file, and still felt it got you completely wrong?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Open the meeting the way Minyard opens a visit: give the group three words to hold, such as spoon, red, hill, and ask for them back at the end.
- Have each member write one true sentence about their own week. Then the person on their left reads it aloud in a flat voice, as an exhibit, and the group discusses how it sounds.
- Take a show-of-hands vote on Voss's offer: should Rachel have taken the family seat and the extra aide? Vote again at the end and see who moved.
- Rank it like Lily: each member scores the most unsettling moment in the book out of ten and defends the number.
- Invite anyone who has chosen a care home for a parent to share how they decided, and what they would look for now after reading the book.