A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Shift

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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Two women who kept careful records of what happened to care-home residents after visiting hours are dead, and both deaths were ruled self-inflicted. Rachel Adler never believed it. When her search collides with Detective Ray Nowak's case, the two deaths begin to reveal a machinery that turns restraint into care and witnesses into liabilities.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Chemical restraint · Silenced witnesses · The record as cover

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 in Debbie Hargrove's apartment, cleaner than Nowak's own, with a capped pen and not one page left to write on. At what moment did you stop believing the scene, and why?

02 Nowak notices the pen, says "Huh," and still signs the death self-inflicted. Why do you think he wrote it that way, and have you ever signed off on something you doubted?

03 Gloria insists that Cora was keeping count, whatever the ruling says. How much weight should a grieving mother's certainty carry against an official finding?

04 We meet Cora alive, bringing Gloria peppermints and making her repeat "you tell them your girl kept count," while we already know she will die. How did those ordinary visits change the way you read her death?

05 Debbie writes down what she actually saw beside Roland Ferris's chart, and her calls to the state grow shorter each time. What did you first make of those shortening calls, and did your reading change later?

Rachel Adler

06 Rachel counts twenty-seven tablets on a twenty-eight-day card and quietly swaps the prescription for melatonin. Was that protection, deception, or both, and would you have done it?

07 Rachel places Gloria at Meridian Grove, inside the very chain she suspects. Given the cost, the waiting lists and Gloria's needs, did she have a real alternative?

08 Rachel asks Imani, a young aide with far less security than she has, to watch Gloria at night. Is it ever fair to ask someone with less power to take a risk on your behalf?

09 Rachel really did pull a record she had no right to see, and the chain uses it against her. Should one true failing make a person's other claims easier to dismiss?

10 Gloria tells Rachel she knows Rachel is not her daughter and chooses her anyway. What does chosen family mean in this book, and what does Rachel owe Gloria because of it?

11 Rachel refuses hospice sedation for Gloria and says, "I'm not going to help her miss her own life going out." Was that an act of love, or did Rachel put her own needs first?

Nowak and the People Who Helped

12 Nowak and Rachel begin as wary strangers who each hold something back. What finally makes them trust each other, and did their slowness to share cost anyone?

13 Dr. Weir will not write murdered and amends Cora's ruling instead, calling undetermined "the most honest word I'm allowed." Is an honest doubt a real victory, or does it fall short of justice?

14 Nowak is offered his twenty-six years and his pension if he lets the case stop at one doctor. Why does he refuse, and would you have refused?

15 Imani has been ashamed for months that she stopped asking about Miss Odessa. How does her 911 call for Gloria answer that silence, and what does it cost her?

16 Yolanda Reeves vanishes and Nowak fears she is dead, but she has run. Was running cowardice, good sense, or something else?

17 Mara Osei hesitates to publish and admits she visits her own mother "in daylight." How does the book treat people who see a problem but are slow to act on it?

The Machine and Its People

18 Corinne Merrick arrives for her interview with neat records and a warm manner, and closes with a remark about Gloria's overnight care. Why is a polite threat more chilling than an open one?

19 Merrick tells Rachel that Cora and Debbie were orders that reached her hands, then dies in a room staged exactly like theirs. Did you feel any sympathy for her, and should you?

20 Dana Brandt only processed a work order, but it was dated before anyone had found Cora. Where does responsibility begin for a person who just did their small part?

21 Dr. Ostrander published his sedation framework in the open and offers Gloria a private room on the garden side. Can a kindness from the man who designed the harm ever be a gift?

22 The chain uses new visiting hours, not a ban, and the doses cluster before Rachel can arrive. What does the novel suggest about how harm hides inside ordinary rules?

23 After Ostrander's arrest, the chain calls it the act of one rogue doctor. Why do institutions so often survive by offering up a single face?

The Twists

24 Which discovery hit you hardest: the matching eight days before testimony, Brandt's early work order, Merrick's dispatch log, or the second storage unit?

25 Cora hid her final proof in the one place she believed no one would search, her mother's failing memory. What did you think of that choice, and of the burden it placed on Gloria?

26 Rachel leaves Gloria's bedside for three hours to retrieve the document, and Gloria dies while she is gone. Was it worth it, and could the story have let her have both?

27 Nowak thinks that "nothing in the envelope was worth it, and the envelope was going to change everything." Can both of those things be true at once?

28 The Meridian letters come off the building, and a new name goes up with "the math unchanged under it." Is exposure a victory if the business simply reopens?

The Ending

29 Mara spots the same title style on a ratings certificate and on the approval above Harmon. How did "The watchdog and the wolf drew their pay from the same account" change your trust in ratings?

30 Rachel gave Lily “the soft version” of Cora’s death to protect her. Did that protection leave an opening for the man at Bellhaven, and how much should a parent tell a fifteen-year-old?

31 Lily’s friend praises her as someone who notices things and tells her to keep their talks secret, “Especially not you.” Which warning signs did you spot, and when?

32 Rachel feels fog, heavy legs and a metallic taste through the last chapters, and she blames grief. What did you suspect, and how did not knowing shape the ending for you?

33 The book ends on a quiet voice: “I didn’t call for her,” he said. Then: “I called for you.” Who do you think he is, and what do you expect for Rachel next?

Beyond the Book

34 The title names a work shift, but a great deal shifts in this story. Which shift, in a person, a case or a role, felt most important to you?

35 If someone you love lived in memory care, what would you now watch for, and whom would you trust?

36 Have you ever had to decide whether to keep quiet or report something at work? How did this book make you think about that choice?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Take a vote at the start and again at the end: should Rachel have left Gloria’s bedside to get the last document? See whether the discussion changes anyone’s mind.
- Build a quick timeline together of who knew what and when, from Cora’s first count to the release, and talk about the moments when one phone call might have changed everything.
- Have a few members rewrite the final kitchen scene from Lily’s point of view, then read them aloud and compare how each version sees Rachel.
- If your group has read The Chart, pair the two books and talk about how Rachel changes between them.
- Discuss what protections whistleblowers in care settings have, and whether they seem enough after reading.