A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Testimony

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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Elena Vargas broke the law to stop a killer, and it cost her license and her reputation. Then his defense lawyer subpoenas her, for the defense. Under oath, fifteen feet from the man who confessed to her, Elena must answer every question about the remorse she saw, while Diane Hollowell listens from the gallery.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Legal manipulation · Witness vulnerability · Moral consequence

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 The book opens with Marcus bringing carnations to his mother's grave, before the subpoena arrives. Why do you think the story shows Elena's new life before it threatens it?

02 Elena did what she believed was right in The Privilege and lost her license and her office. Going in, did you think the cost had been worth it, and did this book change your answer?

03 Gerald Fisk subpoenas Elena for the defense, hoping her honest observations will help Thomas. How did it feel to watch the truth become a tool for the other side?

04 Asked by Margaret if she is over it, Elena answers, "I'm not over it," and then, "But I'm through it." What is the difference, and does she prove it by the end?

05 Elena admits to Dr. Reeves, "I'm afraid I'll feel compassion." Why does that frighten her more than cross-examination, and is compassion for Thomas a betrayal of Ryan?

Elena on the Stand

06 Priya Sharma drills Elena on one answer: “My judgment about the dual relationship was compromised. My ability to observe a patient’s psychological state was not.” Do you believe both halves of that sentence?

07 Sharma trains Elena to answer only the question asked and then stop. Is a carefully narrow true answer still the whole truth, and have you ever told the truth in a way that misled?

08 Under oath, Elena says Thomas “does not pose an ongoing danger to public safety.” Remembering how he watched Diane in the first book, did you agree with her?

09 The prosecutor, Rivera, makes Elena repeat “I hope so” in open court with Diane fifteen feet away. Was that cross-examination fair, cruel, or necessary?

10 Rivera draws four yeses about Ryan’s memorial: Elena attended, she knew, she cried, she concealed. Which of those answers do you think hurt Diane most?

11 Elena cannot lie and cannot refuse to answer. What would you have done on the stand, and would you have let yourself look at the third row?

Diane and Jerome

12 Diane sits in the third row with Jerome beside her and her spiral notebook in her lap. How did the courtroom scenes look different through her eyes?

13 Diane already knew Ryan lay in the road for “approximately eleven minutes.” Why does a fact she knew hit so much harder when a prosecutor says it aloud?

14 Diane is shaken that Thomas looks so ordinary, a face you would pass on the street. Would it be easier if people who did terrible things looked the part?

15 In her statement Diane describes Ryan’s terrible coffee and his folder of seventeen projects, then turns to her son: “I’m here, sweetheart.” What did her testimony accomplish that a verdict could not?

16 Diane remembers a man in a charcoal suit walking the perimeter of Ryan’s garden six months before he died. What did you make of that memory, and did it change how you saw Thomas?

17 Jerome checks that the paper spelled Ryan’s name right, and at the end sends word to “bring gloves.” What kind of support does Jerome offer that no one else in the book does?

Katherine, Reina and the Trial

18 Katherine's divorce is final and she is becoming Katherine Alderman again, yet she takes the stand. Why do you think she chose to speak?

19 Katherine bought Thomas eucalyptus hand cream for his raw knuckles and left a note: "For your hands. Love, K." Can a kind gesture also be a way of not asking?

20 Katherine testifies that when the detectives came, she said "What did you do?" because she had known for months that something was wrong. How responsible is a spouse who chooses not to know?

21 Reina counts everything, including the 114 times he has testified, and Fisk throws his count off with Mark Devlin's affidavit. Did your trust in Reina change during his testimony?

22 Fisk is skilled and works within the rules. Is he a villain or simply good at his job, and does Thomas deserve a strong defense even when readers know he is guilty?

23 Is remorse relevant to justice? Should a court care whether a killer is sorry?

24 The verdict lands on Elena, Diane, Katherine and Reina in turn. Whose reaction to the word "Guilty" stayed with you, and why?

The After

25 Marcus learns that a teacher connected to the garden, "Some lady from the South Side," quietly vouched for him. Who do you think she was, and what does that choice say about her?

26 Diane tells Elena, "The truth wasn't the problem, Elena. The timing hurt people." Do you agree, and is that fair to everything Elena was up against?

27 Diane says plainly that she is not calling to forgive, yet she invites Elena to see the magnolia. What is the difference between forgiving someone and letting them back in?

28 Elena read Diane's photographs of the bare magnolia as accusations, and Diane says they were never punishment. Have you ever badly misread someone's silence or message?

29 Margaret reveals that Thomas came to her for therapy fifteen years earlier and that she refused him. Is any of that guilt really hers to carry, and why did she wait so long to tell Elena?

30 Hiding a tremor, Margaret tells Elena she will stop keeping things from her: “You’re ready.” How has the relationship between teacher and student changed since the first book?

The Letter and Beyond

31 Thomas’s letter opens, “I wasn’t alone in the car.” What was your first reaction, and did any earlier moment suddenly look different?

32 Thomas writes that the verdict is correct and “I killed Ryan Hollowell,” but refuses to name the passenger. Is the letter a real confession, one more act of control, or both?

33 Elena testified that she saw Thomas clearly. Does the letter prove her wrong, or only that she saw part of him?

34 The book is divided into The Subpoena, The Trial and The After. Which part stayed with you longest?

35 Elena puts the letter in her bag, “and the letter was not done with her.” What do you think she should do with it, and what do you expect from the next book?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Stage a short mock cross-examination: one member plays Rivera and asks three questions, another answers as Elena, and the group decides whether each answer was the whole truth.
- Before you start, have everyone say which verdict they wanted at the halfway point, then talk about whether that changed as the trial went on.
- Give one member Diane’s statement to read aloud from the book, then talk about what a family’s words can do in a courtroom.
- Cast the trial: choose actors for Elena, Fisk, Rivera, Katherine and Diane, and defend your picks.