A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Unburned

The Death Row Sessions, Book Four · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

Elliot Marsh writes the life stories of men the state is about to kill. His new subject, Dell Kroft, was sentenced for a house fire that killed six members of one family, and he speaks of heat the way other men speak of music, yet never of that house. The eldest daughter survived only because she was on the night shift, and she has bought a seventh plot beside the six graves. Fire has already found Elliot too: at a fatal fire, a stranger signs the cause accidental and hands him his own business card from the ashes, with his home address on the back in someone else's hand.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

- Fires Written Off as Accidents
- The One Daughter a Fire Left Behind
- What a Killer's Voice Does to the Man Writing It Down
- Institutions That Protect Themselves
- Who Pays for the Truth

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 The book opens at a burned duplex, where a stranger with a square pen signs the cause line on the hood of his car and hands Elliot his own scorched business card, with Elliot's home address on the back. What did that opening make you fear for Elliot?

02 When Elliot learns Dale Ferris is dead, his first feeling is relief, his second is nothing, and he notices the order. How did you feel about Elliot in that moment, and how much of that feeling lasted to the end?

03 The woman in the other half of the duplex walks out untouched with her cat, and the landlord had put new detectors in both halves the week before. When did that party wall start to bother you?

04 For the first time in the series there is no countdown: a stay holds the date back, and Iris Vann tells Elliot there is no hurry. How did the missing clock change the way you read Part One?

05 Elliot notices that his assignment letter was typed on a Saturday morning, before the Ferris fire was even reported. What did that one detail tell you about the people who send him his work?

Dell Kroft

06 In the first session Kroft rests the backs of his hands on the steel table the way a firefighter tests a door, and smells the duplex on Elliot's coat. How did the author make a calm, proud fire-setter so hard to stop listening to?

07 Kroft looks down on the amateurs who pour accelerant more than he looks down on murderers, and he builds every fire to look like the occupant's own appliance. Did his pride in his craft make him more frightening or less?

08 At twelve, Kroft was beaten for a skillet fire he did not set, after the volunteer chief wrote it up as juvenile fire-play. How much did that childhood explain, and how much did you want it to explain?

09 For years Kroft kept one live match the guards missed, never struck it, and left it to Elliot, certain Elliot would never strike it either. What does that match mean to each of them?

10 The state executes Kroft at the midpoint of the book, after a lockdown cancels the session where he promised the rest, and he finishes his story in pencil pages. How did it feel to lose him halfway, and how did the second half read without his voice in the room?

Greta and Caleb

11 Greta still works the night shift that kept her out of the house that night, and she has bought a seventh plot beside the six graves. What did that plot tell you about her grief?

12 Through Greta's photographs we meet Caleb, fourteen, the boy who put his hand up for anything, whose name she taped on his bike and whose glasses lived in the basket. Which detail about him stayed with you longest?

13 Greta's nursing degree was paid for by Corvale Cares, and a Corvale liaison later sits at her kitchen table offering her the anniversary speech and a paid role. How did you read her refusal, made in front of Elliot?

14 When Greta's license is suspended on an anonymous complaint, she turns on Elliot, because nobody had called her in eight years until he did. Was she right to blame him?

15 Greta takes a kitchen knife to the playground plaque while a Corvale truck idles in the lot, then leaves the plaque face down on the bench. What did that act give her, and what did it cost her?

Elliot and the People Who Keep Him

16 Curtis Mabry signs the Ferris fire accidental, sits beside Elliot at the execution, and later tells him at a diner counter that Samaira is on their list only because Elliot keeps calling her. What did you make of Mabry, and of what he wanted Elliot to know?

17 Elliot moves Samaira out of state, has her change her number, installs her smoke detector, and asks her not to tell him her new address. Was that love, protection, or a kind of loss, and would you have done the same?

18 Elliot slips a decoy complaint into the bundle in his desk drawer, and later every sheet is still there except that one. What did the missing page prove, and how did it change your sense of how closely he is watched?

19 The sergeant from The Collector does not believe the Ferris fire was an accident, yet asks Elliot to keep her name off anything he writes. What did her help, and her caution, show about what it costs to say what you know?

20 The heater Elliot locked in his closet comes back to his bedside, plugged in and on high, and the program's last slip carries his own name with nothing after it. What do you think the people who keep Elliot want from him now?

The Wrong Stories

21 The book leads Elliot, and the reader, from a lone fire-setter to a debt killing over Neil Sarratt's truck loan with Royce Tasker. Which explanation did you believe, and for how long?

22 When Elliot tells Greta it was about her father's truck, she is almost relieved, because then it was not random. Why might a reason, even a terrible one, be easier to carry?

23 Everything turns when Greta reads Elliot's draft, stops at the father's room, and tells him her father never slept there, because Caleb let no one in. How did learning that the target was the boy change the pages you had already read?

24 For a few chapters the Halsey Avenue explosion seems to point at what Neil Sarratt knew. Then, in Marta Fiala's case box, Elliot finds Caleb's name and home address on a witness list. What did you feel first?

25 E. Renner signed the first Sarratt finding, the findings in Kroft's two-state run, and the causes on Tasker's rentals, and he has sent Greta a birthday card every year for eight years. Which discovery about him chilled you most?

The Change in Elliot

26 Elliot describes a scene photograph by its light before its dead, lays Kroft's doodles out by the draw they show, and finds himself timing the trucks from the hill. When did you first notice the change in him?

27 At Mateo's burning apartment Elliot stands on the far curb, admires the draw at the stairwell window while Mateo is still inside, and knows he was not going to move. How did you react, and does it matter to you that no one was harmed by his stillness?

28 In her kitchen in the spring, Faye Brandt pulls Elliot's hand out of the burner flame because he has not felt it. What has she seen in him that he cannot see himself?

29 Kroft chose Elliot as his witness because he knew Elliot would watch the line the way Kroft watched a window. Was Kroft right about him?

Mateo and the Last Page

30 Mateo Quintero leaves the flowers at the back-left corner of the Sarratt lot, follows Elliot in his pickup, and agrees to a sworn statement only if his mother's name goes on nothing. How did your view of him change across the book?

31 Mateo loses his job the day after Elliot finds him, and his apartment burns after Renner shakes Elliot's hand at the anniversary. How responsible is Elliot for what happened to him?

32 Mateo gives the deposition Caleb never got to give and names the liaison who yelled at Halsey. Then Corvale settles, sealed, with no admission, and the same liaison screws a new plaque to the wall. How did that outcome sit with you?

33 On the last page Mateo tells Elliot that Caleb saw nothing at Halsey, because he was looking at Mateo. Knowing Caleb carried his friend's words to a lawyer to keep Mateo and his hiding mother off any paper, how did your grief for Caleb change?

34 Under Caleb's name on the bike tape, in Greta's same round hand, is Mateo's. Who do you think the title, The Unburned, belongs to: Greta, Mateo, Elliot, or someone else?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Before the meeting, have each member pick one of Kroft's fires from the memoir pages and say what they admired in how he described it, and when they caught themselves admiring it.
- Make a list of the small things the book shows about Caleb: his hand always up, his glasses in the basket, the trucks he could suddenly name, the closed door. Talk about which ones you noticed the first time, and which only made sense on the last page.
- Hold a vote: when did you first suspect the fire was about one room? Compare answers and see who held on to the debt killing longest.
- The Kimbrough mother asks Elliot not to tell her if her heater was not the cause. Talk about whether you would want to know, and whether Elliot owed her the truth.
- Cast it. Who would play Elliot, Dell Kroft, Greta, Mateo, and Curtis Mabry, and why?
