A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Unmissed

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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Ghostwriter Elliot Marsh disappears into other people's voices for a living. His new subject is Peter Lund, a mild, courteous serial killer weeks from execution, who has confessed and asked for Elliot by name. Session after session, across a steel table in a cold room, Peter tells the story of the people no one looked for, and his calm voice begins to move into Elliot's own.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

The banality of evil · Who society chooses not to miss · Complicity of the listener

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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

First Impressions

01 The book opens with Elliot's dream of Martin Sligh reading Elliot's own sentences back to him, and the name Dana Frey. How did knowing about Dana from the first page shape the way you watched Elliot take this job?

02 A year after Samaira left, Elliot still sets out two cups every morning and leaves her list on the fridge. What do those small habits tell you about him?

03 Peter asks for Elliot by name, and the motel clerk knows him before he signs the register. When did the book first make you uneasy, and was it Peter or something around him?

04 Sligh left Elliot one rule: "never like a subject." Did Elliot keep it, and did you manage to keep it as a reader?

05 Peter's memoir begins with a nine-year-old seeing to a hen that had stopped laying, then warming the kitchen for his mother. Why do you think he chose to begin his life story there?

Peter Lund

06 Peter's father counted heads at the table and was satisfied "when the number came right." How much does the day at the fair explain Peter, and how much should a childhood ever explain?

07 Peter is courteous, patient and helpful, and Elliot often finds him the best company in the room. Why is a polite killer more frightening than one who looks like a monster?

08 Peter kept a drawer of small objects, a daisy pin, a railroad watch, a wedding band, and gave them a quiet hour every Sunday. Is that remembering, owning, or something else?

09 Peter walked in the lantern search for the man he led to the quarry's edge and decided, "Being looked for, I learned that week, is the same walk as looking." What did that line reveal about him?

10 During the lockdown, Peter lays two fingers on Elliot's pulse and says, "Not yet, Elliot." What do you think happened in those missing minutes, and to the button?

11 Peter kept the library card from Elliot's Sligh book against his chest, with his own name first on it. How did learning that change your sense of who chose whom?

Elliot Marsh

12 In a diner, Elliot sizes up a stranger with Peter's questions, "Who would come? How soon?" and then turns them on himself. Where does a writer's empathy end and this kind of absorption begin?

13 Elliot slips his own sentence about the gift of attention into Peter's memoir, and Peter lets it stand. When does a ghostwriter stop recording a voice and start improving a killer?

14 For a while Elliot believes Peter is protecting someone else. Why was he so ready to believe it, and how did the Sligh book make him hungry for a second chance?

15 Elliot finds Peter's pencil on his own early page: "I sat under it until the light had nowhere left to go but into me." He had thought it his best line. Whose book is it by then?

16 Samaira told Elliot he listened to her the way he listened to a subject. Did she see him more clearly than he saw himself?

The Missing and the People Who Loved Them

17 Peter chose people whose absence he believed no one would notice, yet Verna Wendt's sister tended her room, a detective says "That one's mine," and Mrs. Kessler kept a plate laid. Who are the unmissed, really?

18 The cousin who comes asking leaves saying, "He couldn't swim." What does her quiet doubt tell us about what grieving families know?

19 Mrs. Kessler laid a place for Sara-Beth for thirteen years, then cleared it herself in less than a minute while no one moved to help. What did that scene mean to you?

20 Peter remembers Sara-Beth as Sadie, sixteen or seventeen, when she was fifteen. What does his carelessness with her name say about his claim to keep his victims perfectly?

21 Alison Merrick's bench at the church, Ansel Coburn, and the name she said at the end all surface late. Why do you think the book holds Alison's own story back so long?

22 Cal Haskett built the case against Peter honestly and died believing it. How should we judge a decent investigator who was certain and wrong?

The Twists

23 Peter insists on a rainy night, telling Elliot, "Put the rain back," though the record says it was dry. When did you first suspect he had not killed Alison, and what tipped you off?

24 Peter says he confessed to be "Finished," and that "The needle is the notary." Did his reason for taking another man's crime surprise you, and did it make sense?

25 Under the apple tree the searchers find a second, much older grave, a nine-year-old named Ezra Ledbetter. How did that discovery change Peter's golden childhood summer for you?

26 Dwayne Buckner wrote to Peter for nine years, and at their last session Peter says, "Give my regards to Dwayne." What do you think Peter knew, and for how long?

Choices With No Right Answer

27 Elliot trades a flattering monument, the best writing of his life, for the place where Sara-Beth is buried. Was it the right bargain, and would you have made it?

28 Elliot strikes a match to burn the manuscript and presses the flame out before Peter's first true line burns. Why can't he destroy it, and should he have?

29 The governor's yes arrives after "the whole dose was already in Peter." Who, if anyone, carries the blame for executing a man for a murder he did not commit?

30 Peter named Elliot his witness, and that schedule took Elliot down the stairs just as Buckner was climbing them with a tire iron. Did Peter save Elliot on purpose, and does it matter?

The Ending and Beyond

31 Elliot tells Samaira, "It was just a job, Sam." Why does the lie come so easily, and what did you feel as the moment to tell the truth closed?

32 The book ends with Peter's bound book on the shelf, two cups on the counter, and a dream of "a second door" standing open. What do you think the program wanted from the recordings, and from Elliot?

33 Should a killer's memoir be written at all? Who benefits when we read a murderer in his own voice?

34 Did you ever enjoy Peter's voice, and how did you feel about enjoying it?

35 Have you ever noticed someone else's voice or habits creeping into your own? How did you realize it?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Read one of Peter's quieter passages aloud, such as the wall in the rain or the Sunday drawer, and talk about how the writing makes him sound reasonable.
- Take a vote before and after you discuss it: was Elliot right to trade the monument for Sara-Beth's grave?
- Split into two sides and debate whether Elliot should have burned the manuscript that night at the motel desk.
- Have each member rewrite Elliot's last phone call with Samaira in a version where he tells her the truth, then compare what each version risks.
- Cast it: who would you choose to play Peter so that viewers trust him, and who could play Elliot slowly changing?