A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Witness

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

ABOUT THE BOOK

Elena Vargas has her license back and a clinic on Chicago's west side. Then a shaking stranger tells her they were on Sheridan Road the night Ryan Hollowell died, and saw something the trial never heard. When that patient goes silent, Elena may be the only person who knows. Meanwhile two other women are following the same buried truth from different directions.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Hidden contracts | The weight of complicity | Final 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 Elena spending nine minutes "learning what she could from an empty chair." What does that habit say about her, and why do you think the final chapter returns to it?

02 Dennis Cole kept what he saw to himself for a year and a half because he had a record and feared being blamed. Why do you think he finally spoke, and why to Elena?

03 In the first session Elena offers Dennis a safe way out, talking only about his sleep, and then chooses to name Sheridan Road herself. Was that the right call for him, and for her?

04 Dennis says, "I was the one who held him. And I never told anyone." What did those eleven minutes in the rain mean to him, and what do they mean to you?

05 Dennis asks, "Why does everyone keep saying he was alone?" How did his account change what you believed about the night Ryan died?

Elena and the Silence

06 When Reina calls, the early read on Dennis is “probable suicide,” and Elena knows things that point the other way but cannot say them. What would you have done on that phone call?

07 Reina tells Elena, “People set on leaving don’t buy the dog.” How did the book make you think about which deaths get a second look and which get closed quickly?

08 The privilege that once cost Elena her license now binds her to a dead patient’s words. Should confidentiality outlive the person who confided, and who should be allowed to release it?

09 Elena has carried Nadia’s file, and her guilt over Nadia, for years. Did learning Nadia’s story change how you saw Elena’s careful habits, including her silences?

10 Jaylen, a former patient, confesses his own failure to act and then refuses to let Elena turn the conversation back to him. Is it fair for Elena to take help from someone she once treated?

11 Near the end of her life, Margaret tells Elena, “The job was to act when the acting mattered.” What did Margaret give Elena that the law could not, and was it the right advice?

Katherine and Mara

12 Katherine Alderman discovers that her signatures were real; she simply never read what she signed. Is choosing not to read a kind of guilt, and have you ever signed something you did not read?

13 Someone enters Katherine’s apartment and leaves only small signs, the worst of them her father’s fountain pen lying uncapped on the counter. Why is that quiet intrusion more frightening than a robbery?

14 Thomas called the pantry on Foster Avenue her little hobby and never set foot in it. Why do you think the book keeps returning there, from Renata’s family to the new volunteer, Nina?

15 Mara is certain Vera was in the car, but “Belief was not sourcing.” Did you respect her decision to publish a narrower story, or wish she had printed what she believed?

16 Mara cuts the unnamed therapist from her article so she will not draw Vera a map to Elena’s clinic. What does that choice say about her, and how did your view of Mara change across the book?

17 Three women follow three threads toward one truth: a therapist, a former wife and a reporter. Which thread pulled you in most, and why?

Thomas, Vera and Nadia

18 Thomas finally tells Reina about Nadia: “I killed her in an office, the cheapest kind of killing there is.” Did this confession change how you judge him across the whole series?

19 Thomas gives up the last of the truth with nothing left to gain, because “a half-told truth is a better-managed lie.” Has he earned anything by it, and has he really changed?

20 Vera went to the police first and was ignored, then took Thomas’s money instead. At what point, if any, did you sympathize with her, and when did that sympathy end?

21 Vera tells Elena, “We are the same failure, Doctor, wearing two different sentences.” Is she right in any way, and how is Elena’s failure different from hers?

22 Elena answers, “Grief explains the first step. It does not excuse the phone call that killed Dennis.” Can love for someone explain a terrible act without excusing it?

23 In Vera’s memory of the crash, she says “Slow down,” but afterward “She did not tell him to stop.” How responsible is a passenger who sees everything and says nothing?

24 Nadia’s death was ruled a suicide while a corroded rail and a buried inspection told a different story. How did the book make you feel about how quickly a person’s history can become the official explanation?

The Ending

25 Elena calls Reina, leaves the line open, and only then walks into the waiting room to face Vera. Was that brave, reckless, or exactly right?

26 At the police station Elena tells Reina, “I’m pointing at a night and a person,” without repeating what Dennis told her. Did she keep faith with Dennis, bend it, or break it?

27 Whitlock says, “Thomas’s letter gave us the lead. The records gave us proof.” Katherine insists that the man who stopped for Ryan belongs on the list. Why does that matter so much to her?

28 At the garden, Elena tells Diane that Ryan was not alone at the end, and Diane thanks her “For deciding I could hold it.” What did that moment mean for both women?

29 The board lets Elena keep her license, with a cautionary notation in her file. “Sharma called it a win. Elena called it accurate.” Which word would you choose?

30 The series closes with Elena opening the door to Albert Pruitt, who “was nobody’s case.” Why do you think the story ends on an ordinary new patient, and did that ending satisfy you?

Looking Back on the Series

31 Who is the witness of the title: Dennis, Katherine, Mara, Elena, or someone else?

32 Looking back at all three books, who changed the most: Elena, Diane, Katherine, Thomas, or someone else?

33 Across the series, silence protects people and also gets people killed. Which silence in these books did the most harm, and which did the most good?

34 Have you ever known something that could have helped someone and stayed quiet? What finally decides when keeping quiet becomes wrong?

35 If you could ask Elena one question after the final page, what would it be?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- If your group read all three books, spend the last half hour on the whole series: vote on the best scene, the hardest choice, and the character you would most want to meet.
- Hold a two-sided debate on Elena’s visit to the police station: one side argues she kept her duty to Dennis, the other that she crossed the line, then take a vote.
- Try Katherine’s habit at the meeting: pass around one page of the book and have each person read it slowly, line by line, looking for one detail they missed the first time.
- Rewrite one scene out loud: Dennis tells the officer about the woman in the car on the night Ryan died. How might all three books have gone differently?