A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Whereabouts Unknown

The Horizon Cases, Book Two · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

A thirteen-year-old girl has been gone from a Chicago group home for six weeks. Her case is still open, and no one is looking for her. Back on the job after the events of Failure to Protect, caseworker Nadia Cole finds the two words the system uses to stop searching, whereabouts unknown, and a company that profits from every empty bed. Ten years back, under another soft word, is a girl Nadia once swore to protect.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

Missing children in care | The cost of a closed file | Guilt and redemption

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 with Kayla finding the window before she lets herself sleep, then walking past the crying little boy down the hall. Why do you think the story begins with a child escaping instead of an adult searching?

02 Devon draws his mother twice, once when she is up and once when she is down, with himself waiting beside her. What did that drawing tell you about the Ellis family that the anonymous report could not?

03 Shauna tells Nadia that people always need something, and “That’s the part they leave off the paper.” What gets left off the paper in this book, and who decides?

04 What did the phrase whereabouts unknown mean to you before this book, and what does it mean to you now?

05 In the fourth chapter, Langford puts a checkmark beside a vacancy without reading the status of the child who left it. When did you first understand what that checkmark meant?

Nadia and the Girl From Ten Years Ago

06 For ten years Nadia believed one word about Destiny Williams: absconded. Why might believing a child ran away be easier to live with than looking closer?

07 Nadia tells Darius, "Absconded isn't a thing she did. It's a thing it lets everybody else stop doing." Where else in the book does a word give people permission to stop?

08 At twenty-one, Nadia talked Destiny out of the home she asked to stay in and called it advocacy. How much of what happened to Destiny do you think Nadia should carry?

09 Darius tells Nadia she said Destiny's name in her sleep all that winter on his couch. Why does that moment land so hard, and what does Darius give her that no one else can?

10 Yvette remembers Destiny asking for "her lady" and counting the days to Thursday. How did that memory change your sense of Nadia's guilt, and of her love?

Kayla

11 Kayla says the staff "teach you the word" so the children will stay. How does a threat like that work on a child, and why does Kayla decide to run instead?

12 Kayla's hardest rule is never to carry anyone, and she keeps it with the little boy until she asks that he come with her. Did you judge her for leaving him, and what made her set the rule down?

13 Kayla gives Nadia one test: "Find his shoes. Then I'll believe you're different." Why are Trey's shoes, with their one wrong-colored lace, such powerful proof to a child?

14 Kayla agrees to speak only to a reporter, with no name, and only if someone keeps looking for her afterward. What do her conditions tell you about what adults have taught her?

15 Simone and Rae aged out of the same system and now catch the children who run from it. Is their network a rescue, an accusation against the system, or both?

The People Inside the System

16 Langford remembers a child stuck in an emergency room for ninety-four days with no bed, and he built Horizon to answer that. Is his argument for more beds a real defense, or the story he tells himself?

17 At the hearing, Langford admits he never read the status beside Trey's name because "It was a vacancy." Why does that one sentence undo him when months of evidence could not?

18 Merrick says, "I never destroyed a record in my life," and turns out to be the polite man who calls the medical examiner every spring. What do you make of a man who hid the truth and also kept it?

19 Patricia carried Marcus's death as her own failure for sixteen years before she found the file had been softened. How does learning that your guilt was useful to someone else change a person?

20 Whelan, Doyle, Hendry, and Ms. Foley all follow the rules, and some of them are kind. Which of them troubled you most, and why?

21 Shauna tells Renata not to call the Horizon man back, even though his money would pay for the room the plan demands. Why does help that arrives this nicely frighten her?

Choices With No Right Answer

22 Nadia promises Kayla she will not report what she hears in the laundromat, breaking a duty she has lived by for six years. Was keeping that promise the right call?

23 To bring Devon home, Nadia writes Shauna's childhood into the record, and Shauna answers, "Then write whatever you have to." Did Nadia have the right to make that trade, and did Shauna truly have a choice?

24 Nadia put Rosa's name in a court paper to keep Alma home, and now Rosa faces an immigration hearing. When Lucia says, "Kind does not go with her," what do you think Nadia owes this family?

25 Nadia places a hold she has no grounds for, and when Ferrante asks, she says, "I had a child." Would you have spent your job that way?

26 Priya will not publish the pattern until it can survive a lawyer, while children stay in Horizon homes. Was waiting the responsible choice, or a costly one?

The Twists

27 The reconciliation column says deceased where the county was told absconded. How did that discovery change the way you remembered every earlier mention of Destiny?

28 Trey's shoes were on the quiet girl's shelf during Nadia's very first tour of the West Side house. Did you catch it, and why do you think Nyla carried them with her when she was moved?

29 Merrick's cabinet, filed by date, holds every page he ever removed, including Destiny's missing sheet. Did it feel right to you that the proof came from the man who hid it?

The Ending and Beyond

30 Nadia kneels at a numbered marker in a county field and later has DESTINY WILLIAMS cut into the stone in a child's block capitals. What does naming the dead give the living in this story?

31 Langford tells Nadia, "I built the beds," and she answers, "You didn't read them." Is losing his license and his company enough justice for what happened?

32 Kayla calls from an unknown number to ask whether Nadia found the shoes, and Nadia clears the number from her phone. What does "Whereabouts known. Not located. Known." promise Kayla, and is it enough?

33 Devon's last drawing shows his mother standing with her eyes open, waiting at the bus stop with him, under a whole yellow sun. How did his drawings track the story for you?

34 The final intake sends Nadia back to the house she aged out of at eighteen, where she left her book on the top step. What do you think is waiting behind that door?

35 Shauna asks Nadia what happens to the families who never get someone like her, and neither of them says the answer out loud. What would it take for help not to depend on luck?

36 Have you ever been described by a word, at school, at work, or on a form, that arrived somewhere before you did? How has this book changed the way you think about the words we write about other people?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Hold a short debate on Priya's choice: half the group argues for publishing the pattern the moment she has it, and half argues for waiting until it can stand.
- Take a vote on the moment each of you first suspected Destiny never ran, then compare the clues that tipped you off.

- Rewrite one scene together: tell the laundromat meeting from Nadia's side of the table, and talk about what Kayla's present-tense voice gave the original.
- Serve grilled cheese cut in triangles, the meal Shauna makes Devon on the day he comes home.
