A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

You Messed With the Wrong Mom

A novel · A.R. Hollowell

ABOUT THE BOOK

Shannon Ashby drives a school bus and reads every child on it from her mirror. When nine-year-old Ruby, whose mother walked out, shows her a text from Mom signed with the goodnight Shannon's own mother said every night, Shannon goes cold. At 2 a.m. she finds her son Jesse's tablet warm under his pillow, and a stranger in a children's game who asked him if he ever wished he had a different mom. Under his name, the answer was yes. To find the stranger, Shannon signs in as her son, and every message she types makes her look more like the danger.

THEMES TO TALK ABOUT

- Children who blame themselves
- What a mother owes and forgives
- Words that cannot be taken back
- The secrets children keep for adults

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

35 questions in 8 parts. Choose the ones that spark your group, or work through them in order.

First Impressions

01 The prologue gives us a child on a summer porch with no name, no age and no year. Who did you first think that child was, and how did your guess change as you read?

02 The book opens at 6:40 a.m. at stop 14 with Ruby holding up a text from her mother, and it ends at 6:40 a.m. at stop 14 with a text lighting Maddie's phone. What did the return to that minute and that stop mean to you?

03 Maddie greets Shannon at the door by telling her she is the wrong mom. How did that moment shape the way you saw Shannon's place in her own house?

Shannon

04 Shannon photographs the chat on Jesse's tablet, then deletes the photos in front of him after the stranger threatens him. Was deleting the proof the right call?

05 When she reports the stranger to Investigator Ward Sumner, she holds back the yes and offers a line from her mother's note instead. Why do you think she kept back the one fact that mattered most?

06 Shannon types as her son for weeks, matching a ten-year-old's speed and spelling, until her own chats become a criminal case against her. Where would you have stopped?

07 She says out loud early on that the man who installed Porchlight can see where she is, yet after Crystal's trace she keeps the app on her phone so he will not know she knows. What does that choice tell you about how she fights?

08 For years Shannon read the birthday cards in the shoebox as hope, including the one that came on her eighteenth birthday. How did that last card read to you the first time, and how did it read once you knew who wrote it?

09 Barred by her bail from the bus, she watches her route from her car while Ruby presses a hand to the window. What did losing the route cost her that losing her house did not?

The Children and Their Secrets

10 Jesse says he loves her three times every night and logs on at 2 a.m. for three weeks to keep bug_9 happy. How did you read his silence once you knew why he kept it?

11 Ruby whispers that her mother left because of something Ruby said on the porch. Why does the book let so many children believe the same thing about themselves?

12 Maddie typed the yes on Jesse's account because she was offered a trade: a new mom for her own mother home. Did you blame her, pity her, or both?

13 Micah Tolman calls the man who sends him his dad and believes his own mother still texts him. Is Micah a victim, an accomplice, or a boy who never had the chance to choose?

14 Colt Hatcher keeps his mother's account talking so Crystal can trace the number, and we learn later that he had understood the messages for three years. What did carrying that knowledge alone do to him?

15 Cody Gant is the one who explains the rule of the first and second yes. Why do the children in this book understand the rules better than any adult around them?

The Adults Around Her

16 Neal tells Shannon to delete the chat, a policy on her life names him as beneficiary, and he meets Leigh Spurlock on Saturdays. When did you suspect him, and was his 4 a.m. explanation enough for you?

17 Ward Sumner closed Joy Duval's case in a day in 1991 and clears Everett four times in 2026, yet he is the one who stays on the logging road and makes the arrest at the grave. Does his ending make up for his beginning?

18 Crystal Hatcher let the county believe she walked out, to hide from Boyd and from the man who came for her. When Shannon refused to give Crystal up to clear her own name, was she right?

19 Darlene hangs up on Shannon, then later hands her the letters her father never sent. What did those letters change about the way Shannon remembered Ronnie?

20 Lyman Garland kept one grave and one secret for more than forty years, then lowered his rifle at the fence and agreed to the search. What do you think finally moved him?

The Man From Stop 11

21 Everett waves to Shannon every morning at stop 11 and lifts his hand the same way from the gallery at her bail hearing. Which of his faces frightened you most: the neighbor with the dog, the online-safety consultant, or the State's expert?

22 At nine, Lewie Garland wished his mother gone, and it was his father who answered. When Shannon tells him nobody granted his wish, did you feel any pity for the boy he had been?

23 He never touches a child. His harms to them are messages, a goodnight he stole, and a trade. Is that restraint, or a quieter kind of cruelty?

24 For thirty-five years he waited for wishes, then made one up himself so he could reach Shannon. Why do you think she mattered to him more than any of the others?

The Twists

25 The book hands you one suspect after another: a bully, Neal, Shannon's father, Lyman, and a mother who might still be alive. Which wrong theory did you hold longest, and what broke it?

26 Dot arrives in a parcel marked from Grandma, last seen on Shannon's bed in 1991. Did you believe, as Shannon did, that her mother was alive?

27 On her childhood porch, Shannon finally remembers the voice next door and her own yes. Did you turn back to the prologue, and what had you missed?

28 Krista Bryce's goodbye text in 2026 uses the first line of Joy's 1991 note, and a 1993 birthday card carries the same words. When did you realize who had read that note, and when?

Choices With No Right Answer

29 The second yes is Jesse's plan, and Shannon lets him type it at the kitchen table. Would you have let your child do it?

30 Holding Everett's phone, Shannon writes to Micah in his voice and tells him his mother is dead so he will bring Maddie home. Was that a cruelty, a mercy, or both?

31 Shannon will not put a child on a witness stand, so she goes public with the porch, the wish and her own yes. What did that cost her, and what did it give the children?

32 On Wednesday night she answers twenty-three waiting children as bug_9 and tells each one that their mom stays. How did that scene sit beside the porch in 1991 for you?

The Ending and Beyond

33 Maddie had renamed her contact Mom and never said a word, and that night Shannon says her mother's goodnight to Jesse for the first time. Is this a hopeful ending, a haunted one, or both?

34 What does the title mean to you now? Who was the wrong mom: the woman Maddie met at the door, or the woman Everett finally met on the porch?

35 Have you ever said something to a parent in anger that you could never take back? What would you give to be told it was never your fault?

IDEAS FOR YOUR MEETING

- Hold a show-of-hands vote at the start of the meeting and again at the end: should Shannon have let Jesse type the second yes? See whether the discussion moves anyone.
- Read the prologue aloud after everyone has finished, then list what it never tells you: no name, no age, no year, no phone.
- Draw route 7 on a sheet of paper and mark where each child boards and where the house at stop 11 sits, then talk about what Shannon saw from her seat that no one else could.
- Ask each member which apps are on the children's devices in their own home, who installed them, and who can see what they show.

- Invite everyone to share a goodnight, nickname or saying from their own childhood, and who said it to them.
