

An American Summer, Love and Death in Chicago

Discussion Guide for Community Book Clubs

Chapter 1: May 4 - The Tightrope, a Story in Four Parts [13-17]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Marcelo, struggling with his identity among environmental pressures.

- Given Marcelo's changed lifestyle, what social pressures were at play in leading him to return to criminal activities?
- In what ways can societal norms and peer influence impact our decisions?

Chapter 2: May 12 - Mother's Day [18-39]

Summary: In this chapter, we hear the story of Darren Easterling's murder and how his mother Lisa Daniels is impacted.

- Consider this headline from the *Southtown Star*: "Man Shot to Death in Park Forest Had, Drug, Weapons Convictions" (18). What conclusions about Darren Easterling may this short description lead the public to make? Will they be fair and accurate?
- To what degree does a parent have control over the discourse of their child's life?
- What role does forgiveness play in the progression of grief? How does forgiving Michael Reed help Darren's mother Lisa?

Chapter 3: May 23 - A Conversation: The OGs [40-48]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Jimmie and Napoleon who give insight into the changing nature of gang violence.

- Jimmie and Napoleon note that the nature of violence among organized gangs has become increasingly aggressive, careless, and without reason since the time of their participation. What causes this?

- In obtaining firearms and making a violent presence, Napoleon describes a notion of power. In being feared, can one be powerful? Is this power an illusion if not used for good?

Chapter 4: May 31 - The Tightrope, Part Two [49-61]

Summary: In this chapter, we return to Marcelo's case and learn of his upbringing, trauma from violent experiences, and the efforts that contribute to his trial outcome.

- After sustaining life-altering injuries, Roel tells his aunt, "Maybe this is the only way God could stop me." (57) What might contribute to the persistence in leading a gang-affiliated lifestyle? Are there incentives?
- Is success the best revenge? In what ways may it compare to the fulfillment of "getting even"?

Chapter 5: June 13 - The Tweets [62-73]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet reporter Peter Nickeas who in covering the most gruesome deaths, is affected by the emotional weight of a broken community.

- In reporting of violent incidents, what are the pitfalls in solely viewing the gruesome aftermath? Does negative coverage alone promote pessimism and distract from change initiatives? What can "positive" coverage look like?
- Pete's tattoo states, "The closest bonds we will ever know are the bonds of grief. The deepest community one of sorrow." (73) How can collective grief foster healing in violence-stricken communities?

Chapter 6: June 16 - Father's Day [74-90]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Mike Kelly, who upon volunteering at an orphanage decides to adopt Victor. We explore the bonds they share and the changing nature of their relationship.

- How does Victor's childhood trauma and self-doubt manifest throughout his teenage years? How does his experience as a black individual impact this journey?

- Consider the discussion of guilt and personal burdens in this chapter. How can these feelings be exacerbated by societal norms and expectations?

Chapter 7: June 24 - The Witnesses, Part One [91-98]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Romaine Hill, and through his attack we learn the potential risks of cooperating with the police and legal justice system.

- How is Romaine's situation unique given the culture surrounding police cooperation and self-preservation? In a culture where 'snitching' is greatly frowned upon, do you believe the consequences of his choice to reveal his attacker were worthwhile?
- How do government-funded housing structures fail to set individuals up for success? What biases are at play in giving the poorest the worst living conditions? What might be transformative solutions other than those noted in the text to shift this narrative?

Chapter 8: July 5 - The (Annotated) Eulogy [99-104]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Erin Wells, a mother of five, at her partner Robert's funeral.

- What could be meant by the symbolism of wearing white instead of traditional black at Robert's funeral?
- What may be reasons for Robert continuing to persist in street crime when he had the opportunity to lead a stable family life? How does this conflict of interest put strain on his relationships?

Chapter 9: July 8 - I Ain't Going Nowhere, Part One [105-125]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet social worker Anita and explore her mentor relationship with Thomas, who is grief-stricken by a friend's recent death.

- Reflect on this conversation between Anita and Mr. Kotlowitz: Anita questions, "I asked myself, did he really make it out? One more burden for this kid to carry. I don't know how much more this kid can take." (119) Although Shakaki was murdered and not him, is Thomas subjected to a comparably painful aftermath? Is 'making it out' both a physical and mental state?

- The poem read by Shakaki's cousin at her funeral service describes the hypothetical and how she may have avoided death. Is this realistic? Would not agreeing to meet up with Thomas have prevented her risk of death altogether? Do you believe, given the nature of their environment, that everyone has their time?

Chapter 10: July 14 - Going Home [126-148]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Ashara who moves away from Chicago to reinvent herself and escape her past life. We then explore her reconnection with her childhood friend, Aries.

- In attending college in Daytona Beach, then moving to Philadelphia, "Ashara tried to outrun her world." (132) Is it possible for individuals to fully escape their past or will they always be drawn to their roots?
- Is vulnerability a weakness? Is toughness and humor a ploy for survival?

Chapter 11: July 17 - Day of Atonement [149-179]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Eddie Lopez and witness his growth from his time in prison to his activities post-incarceration.

- To what extent do our greatest mistakes define our worth? Do actions to repair and recover from our wrongdoings speak louder of our character?
- The act of Eddie killing to avenge an injured fellow gang member, and Jorge watching over Eddie in prison demonstrates a culture of friendship and loyalty. In protecting and supporting one another, can there be humanity in gang activities? Is there a greater meaning to participation?
- Consider hope, "Without it, you have nothing. It's about as close to death as one can get without actually dying." (161) In what ways is hope a survival mechanism?

Chapter 12: July 25 - The Two Gerald's [180-198]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Gerald who struggles to cope with the trauma of witnessing relatives perish in a house fire. We learn the story of a second Gerald, Gerald Rice, who is believed to be wrongfully convicted of committing the crime.

- Reflect on Gerald Rice's involvement on the night of the crime. Does his environment imply that fitting in is a necessity? How far should one go to seek social acceptance?
- Compare the notion of a mental prison and a physical prison. How do their restraints and long-term effects differ? Compare?

Chapter 13: August 15 - The Tightrope, Part Three [199-202]

Summary: In this chapter, the criminal courthouse environment is described as we return to Marcelo's case.

- Do you believe that the justice system caters more to the individual circumstance or to jurisdictional convenience and protocol? Are only the guilty convicted? Why?

Chapter 14: August 17 - Artifacts [203-212]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet George who struggles with regret after his son's passing due to his incarceration.

- How did George's incarceration weaken his relationship with his son? How did this breach make his son's death harder to accept?
- What effect does a parent's incarceration have on a child's development? How may they fill the void of their absence? What are the long-term effects?

Chapter 15: August 22 - I Ain't Going Nowhere, Part Two [213-223]

Summary: In this chapter, we return to Thomas and Anita's relationship as Thomas navigates Shakaki's court case and his trauma from the violence he's witnessed.

- Throughout the text, Anita and Thomas have shown a strong connection. How has Anita's support helped Thomas reach his goals? What power does a mentoring relationship hold for those who are struggling?

- Mr. Kotlowitz recalls, “Nobody’s keeping count. Not even Thomas. He just tells me he’s tired, that he’s stopped going to funerals.” (223) After repeated exposure to violence, is there a numbing effect? If so, what may it take to overcome?

Chapter 16: August 24 - This is What He Remembers [224-242]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Benson who recalls to Calvin’s family what he saw of their son’s murder. We explore the consequences of police misconduct and how loved ones are affected.

- In using excessive force without evidence of probable cause, how is law enforcement painted in the eyes of the community? What assumptions and biases may have led to Calvin’s murder?
- What are examples of ways that grief manifested itself in Calvin’s friends and family? How can grieving appear differently across individuals?

Chapter 17: August 29 - The Disco Tour [243-256]

Summary: In this chapter, we meet Illinois’ junior senator, Mark Kirk, and learn his perspective on the best way to combat gang violence. We witness these perspectives shift after education and exposure.

- In labeling all violence as gang-related and profiling young individuals as criminals worthy of incarceration, how are communities failed by those enlisted to protect them? Has this become a civil rights issue?
- Reflect on this statement: “There is no real enemy out there, but instead a conflagration, a firestorm of forces which have led young people to make choices constricted and directed by the burden of circumstance.” (255) How can education expose and motivate outsiders to respond to these inequities in a just manner?

Chapter 18: August 31 - The Witnesses, Part Two [257-268]

Summary: In this chapter, we return to Romaine and view the firsthand consequences of “snitching”. We come to understand how this notion of fear in coming forward affects all jurisdictions and members of the community.

- Consider the irony in sending a child to school with instructions to protect themselves in preparation for the worst. How does this culture of fear taint ordinary life experiences beginning at a young age? How does it impact healthy growth and development? What beliefs and reflexes may be instilled as a result?
- Jose’s mother, a victim advocate, admits, “The attorneys here will tell you that I can bring in anyone in the world’...’Except my son... I’m a victim advocate at my job, but not at my home” (264) In understanding and abiding by the culture of fear, how are greater authorities limited in their capabilities to serve justice?

Chapter 19: September 8 - The Tightrope, Part Four [269-276]

Summary: In this chapter, we return to Marcelo and learn of his reformed life at Mercy and a new school.

- In having his new classmates inquire as to if there are shootings where Marcelo is from, it is apparent that their worlds are vastly different. How is it possible for residents in a relative proximity to be living in entirely different realities? Who is the system built for?

Chapter 20: September 19 - False Endings [277-280]

Summary: In this chapter, the author highlights the collective purpose of the novel’s stories and adds final thoughts on the perception and realities of violence in Chicago.

- Reflect on Kotlowitz’ concluding remarks: “The shooting doesn’t end. Nor does the grinding poverty. Or the deeply rooted segregation. Or the easy availability of guns. Or the shuttered schools and boarded-up homes. Or the tensions between police and residents. And yet each shooting is unlike the last, every exposed and bruised life exposed and bruised in its own way. Everything and nothing remains the same.” (278)

What potential for change do these acknowledgements leave? What power do they hold?

Resources

University of Iowa Counseling Services

<https://counseling.uiowa.edu>, 319-335-7294

CommUnity Crisis Services

<http://builtbycommunity.org>,

Next Steps?

Register to vote to ensure your voice is heard!

<https://www.vote.org/register-to-vote/iowa/>