

A Death on Halconido

A CONVERSATION GUIDE FOR BOOK GROUPS



So, you've chosen to spend an evening on Halconido. Welcome!

What a strange and wonderful thing it is to read a mystery story together, for we each bring our own suspicions, our own small certainties, so that half the pleasure becomes the discovery of how very differently the person beside you has read the very same text. You'll find no right answers in these pages, only the promise that the conversation will invite new questions. And if a single question keeps you arguing cordially past your bedtime, this guide will have done its work.

Copley O'Neal

A COMMUNITY

Halconido Mountain is almost a character of its own, with its mixed forests ringed by arid lowlands, its abundant animal life (including those curious human inhabitants), its shape-shifting weather. What was it like to spend time there? Did the mountain feel like a wilderness retreat, a claustrophobic threat, or something else entirely?

THE ROLES WE PLAY

- Will Aguayo is at once a detective, a would-be teacher, a grandson carrying the advice of his abuelo that we don't always get to pick what we carry, but we can choose how we carry it. Which of his selves felt most like the real Aguayo to you?
- So much of this story turns on ideas of credit and expertise. When the truth about that became clear, how did it change the way you'd been reading the Holme family?
- Which version of yourself do the people around you rely on? Does it match the one that matters most to you?

INTUITION, OR EVIDENCE

- Brandt built a career on the conviction that ornithology must remain a discipline grounded in data, yet the case of his death is steeped in symbolism and myth — what Aguayo calls a story rife with poetry. Whose way of knowing did the mountain reward, in the end? Did that sit right with you?

- Aguayo refuses to discard the details that don't quite fit the pattern. Was there a moment you trusted your own gut even before the evidence caught up? And were you right?
- Cela believes in patient work and understanding systems; Miles believes in dramatic gestures. In the book, which approach is more effective at producing change? What about in the real world?

WHERE THE TWO THREADS MEET

Notice that the people who saw things most clearly in this book were often the ones others were least inclined to take seriously. What do you think the novel is saying about the link between being underestimated and being attuned to what others may miss?

GOING FURTHER: POE AND THE LANGUAGE OF SYMBOLS

(These questions move through the ending and are best saved for a group that has finished the book.)

- The raven opens and presides over this whole story, trailing centuries of literary weight. Did you sense any other echoes of Poe within the novel?
- The novel reaches into Norse myth, too, quoting Odin's fear for his ravens Hugin and Munin — Thought and Memory — that they might one day choose not to return. Aguayo turns that very fear back on its keeper. What did it mean to you that her terror was abandonment, not capture?
- The mystery is told almost entirely in objects: a funeral pyre of shining things, gemstones left like breadcrumbs, a fishing net, a chopstick that was really a baton, two initials pressed into the soil. Which symbol stayed with you, and did you read any of them before Aguayo did?
- The plan nearly works by weaponizing prejudice, the wager being that no one will believe a Native detective who speaks of sacred birds. In what ways does the book attempt to hold Aguayo's inheritance and his demand for hard evidence together?

BEFORE YOU GO

Step outside before you say goodnight. Listen. Can you name a bird by its sound? That's the beginning of seeing the way Aguayo sees.

