

BLUEBIRD SONG

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION

(NOTE: These questions may be downloaded at no cost from the publisher's website: <http://mudflatpress.com/portfolio-item/bluebird-song/>. The reader is encouraged to postpone reviewing the following questions until after reading the story.)

When starting a discussion of Bluebird Song, group members may wish to discuss one of the quotations found in the book. (Please refer to the opening quote about betrayal, and also the page appearing at the end of the book titled "Some Pertinent Quotes.")

FOR GROUP SELECTION:

1. Lyle Murphy had been teaching for 29 years, over which time he became disillusioned with his students, and with the effectiveness of the juvenile rehabilitation facility where he taught. Clearly, he had become a seriously disaffected teacher. Do you know of a teacher like this? What became of him/her? What advice would you have given to Murph, as a parent or a student?

Have you ever become discouraged about a job, or your career path in general? What are some constructive ways that any employee can deal with serious misgivings about his or her work?

2. In Chapter Four, "No longer A Liberal," after Murph has expressed his dislike for Mexican immigrants, a younger teacher says, "That's the problem. Just as soon as you think you have public policy figured out, someone comes along and puts a

human face on things . . . like Maria.” Murph seemed to agree. This happened to Murph with respect to Thorny (i.e., Murph had expressed his intense dislike for those guilty of Thorny’s crime, but then along came Thorny, whom Murph believed had great potential). Only later did Murph discover that Thorny had a very dark past. Thus, a “human face” was put on Thorny’s egregious crime. And in the end, Murph had changed his view to the point where he pleaded for Thorny’s life.

Have you ever had an opinion regarding a public policy issue, only to change your mind after someone you knew was (or would be) seriously and negatively affected by that policy or law? Think about public policy topics such as: health care, abortion, capital punishment, gun control, welfare reform, national debt, law and order issues (e.g., “three strikes and you’re out”), marriage equality, or any of many other contemporary issues where you perhaps changed your initial view after discovering how related policy would negatively affect a friend, an acquaintance, or you.

3. Perhaps like Murph, you or someone close to you has changed political party affiliation over time. Murph was once a liberal, but changed his beliefs and became a conservative. Certainly such a reversal can go either way. There’s a famous quote attributed to Winston Churchill (paraphrased here)— If you’re young and not a liberal, it’s because you don’t have a heart. If you’re old and not a conservative, it’s because you don’t have a brain.

If you’ve observed a political change in yourself, or a friend, describe this. What circumstances caused this change, and did it happen quickly or over many years?

4. Have you ever visited a correctional facility (either juvenile or adult)? What were your impressions? What surprised you? Please explain. (Perhaps your discussion group would like to arrange for such a tour.)

5. Historically, a philosophical division has existed between juvenile versus adult correctional systems. Many have advocated that juvenile corrections should be more rehabilitation oriented, while adult corrections should focus more on punishment. Do you agree with this approach? Why or why not?
6. Do you know anyone who has served time in a correctional facility (either adult or juvenile)? Or perhaps you have. Did the individual change as a result of being incarcerated? If so, how?
7. Maria is portrayed as a special person. Would you consider her to be wise, or naïve? More than once Murph calls her a saint. Describe Maria's qualities, and indicate if you agree that she is some kind of "saint." Have you ever known someone with similar qualities? If so, how did this person fare in the workplace or in school, or in society for that matter?
8. In Chapter Six ("Who do we have here?"), Thorny says to Maria, "Go fuck yourself." If you were the teacher and a student said that to you in class, how would you respond? What would happen in the high school you attended (or currently attend) if a student said that to a teacher? What do you think about the way Murph and Maria handled this situation?
9. It certainly seems that each new generation of teenagers has its particular set of words and expressions (captured to a degree in the book's glossary). What new words were/are in vogue among your fellow high school students? (Please identify the year(s) for your high school experience.)

Do you think that the new words and expressions used by the youth of today are considerably more in number than in years past? If so, what is the increase due to? Why do you think teenagers develop their own vocabulary?

Did the many street language words and terms (refer to glossary) in *Bluebird Song* interfere with, or enhance, your reading of the story? Maybe you think some terms, together with their definitions, are not correct, or that some are outdated. Please comment.

10. In Chapter 30 (“A flag for your retirement bungalow”), there’s a conversation between Maria and Murph about the “gangstas” of today and the gangsters of old (such as portrayed by James Cagney in *Public Enemy #1*, a 1931 film, or by Marlon Brando as Don Vito Corleone, together with Al Pacino as Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*, a 1972 film). Maria suggests that there may not be much difference between those old-style gangsters (from the 1930s and ’40s), and the “gang bangers” of today. Murph disagrees, although he doesn’t explain his opinion. What do you see as the similarities, and the differences, between the old versus the contemporary gang cultures?
11. In your opinion, what are several of the most prominent differences, and challenges, between the teenagers in past decades (say 1960s, or pick another period) when compared to teenagers of today? Maybe you don’t think there are any true differences.
12. If you were convicted of a felony as a teenager and you went to a facility like Cedar Grove Correctional Facility (either for boys or for girls), how well would you survive? What would be your biggest worries?
13. In the prologue, a reference is made to the phrase, “be careful what you wish for.” This sentiment is coupled with the so-called “law of unintended consequences.” Numerous times throughout the story, Murph expressed his great desire to retire and get away from Cedar Grove. His “wish” comes true, but at a huge and unexpected cost. Have you ever had a wish come true (or perhaps a prayer answered), only to regret it later? Explain.

14. Typically there's a pattern associated with pedophiles, many of whom have been trusted family members, friends or neighbors. They can appear to be caring and charming. So much so, that when the victim tries to report that he/she was sexually abused, often no one can believe it. This is how Thorny was intended to be portrayed in the book—namely, that his caring and attractive personality was evident for all to see and appreciate throughout the story, and accordingly none of the other characters in the story suspected his awful crimes. While there were clues in the story, did Thorny's crime surprise you when it was finally revealed? Why or why not?

Have you ever learned that someone you've known is/was a sex offender (i.e., generally defined as a convicted rapist and/or a pedophile)? If so, did you find that difficult to believe? Did you miss some "clues?" Please explain.

15. "Civil commitment" is the practice of retaining inmates convicted as pedophiles or rapists if they are considered to be dangerous and highly likely to re-offend, even though they have served their sentences. This practice has recently been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court (refer to: *Adam Walsh Protection and Safety Act of 2006*). In part, the Supreme Court based its opinion on legal precedent which establishes that for inmates whose sentences are completed, and who have a highly contagious disease, the correctional system is allowed to retain them in prison for the public's safety and well being.

Arguably, civil commitment is the practice of convicting a person not for what he/she did, but for what they *might do*, and therefore entirely contrary to our nation's legal system and citizen rights, (i.e., presumed innocent until proven guilty). How do you feel about this? What danger(s) in the utilization of civil commitment do you see, if any?

In theory, what other crimes could/should be included in the practice of retaining a prisoner in lockup after completing a sentence and *before* a re-offense has

actually been committed. For example, perhaps we should seriously consider retaining criminals who have served their sentences but are likely to re-offend such as: certain murderers; kidnappers; dangerous anarchists; spies engaged in espionage and selling top government secrets; or terrorists?

Do you support the concept of civil commitment for pedophiles?

Can you envision a different method to ensure public safety, such as longer sentences to begin with, or sentencing to an alternate form of confinement?

(Note: Some experts have concluded that chemical castration and surgical castration don't necessarily stop the hardcore pedophile or rapist from re-offending. Some research suggests that only old age (such as over 70) is a good predictor of reduced pedophilia re-offenses. Others have claimed that the effectiveness of psychological counseling designed to change a pedophile to a "non-pedophile" may be as likely to succeed as counseling designed to change a gay to a straight person, i.e., unlikely. In some circles, this is still a matter of debate.)

16. In the author's experience, if the topics of pedophilia or rape enter an otherwise civil conversation, the subject almost always elicits emotionally charged views (often in support of the strongest punishment possible). Even the most thoughtful and forgiving of individuals generally advocate for the relatively stringent punishment for rapists and pedophiles. This strong reaction to the subject of pedophilia is typically more emotionally charged than the reaction toward any other single issue, including the following controversial ones: abortion; gun control; capital punishment; immigration policy; global warming and the environment; gay rights; terrorism; a government-centered versus free-enterprise society; nuclear disarmament; military intervention; and capital punishment. Why do you think there are such strong reactions to the crimes of pedophilia and rape?

17. Do you think Thorny deserved to die?
18. Think about the following quote attributed to Fyodor Dostoyevsky: “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons,” (taken from *The House of the Dead*). What should we, the richest nation in the history of the world (and considered by many to be the most civilized, or one of the most civilized), be doing differently for our incarcerated youth? Or do you perceive that our youth correctional and rehabilitation system is about as good as can be?
19. A key phrase in Biff’s song is—“Keep the faith.” What does this expression mean to you? Is it an expression that is specific to Christianity, or can individuals who don’t consider themselves Christians, or religious at all, also find meaning in this phrase?
- Have you ever been in a position where you’ve lost all hope that things would get better? Moreover, did it seem to you that your situation was doomed to get worse? If so, was there something that eventually worked for you, helping you to “keep the faith” and to believe in a brighter future? Please share with the group.
20. Thorny is terribly conflicted about his religious education, having lost any belief in a merciful god. Have you ever rejected or had serious doubts about religious doctrine that you had accepted/believed earlier in your life. Was this a difficult change for you? Did you feel a sense of loss or a newfound freedom? Please explain.
21. In the last chapter of Part One (“I just know it”), Biff looks at the woodshop ceiling. Thinking that their spirits may be in the shop, he says to the departed Thorny and Murph, “Good bye. God will take you in, along with what you bring to the land up yonder. You’ll like your new home, where just like my song says, ‘The Father waits o’re the way, to prepare us a dwelling place there.’”

Bluebird Song – Discussion Questions

What do you make of this? Do you believe that there is a heaven or some form of a hereafter?

Whether you answer yes or no (or that you have no idea), what is your guess or expectation about what happens to a person after death?

If you answered “yes,” i.e., you do believe there is a heaven, is it conceivable to you that Thorny could end up there?

22. Irony plays a significant role in the story. Can you cite several examples where the author has used this literary device?

23. If you feel there is a logical discussion question (or maybe even a burning question) that results from reading *Bluebird Song*, but it has been left off this list, what is that question?

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