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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Life We Bury by Allen Eskens

Summary

College student Joe Talbert has the modest goal of completing a writing assignment for an English class. His task is to interview a stranger and write a brief biography of the person. With deadlines looming, Joe heads to a nearby nursing home to find a willing subject. There he meets Carl Iverson, and soon nothing in Joe's life is ever the same.

Carl is a dying Vietnam veteran—and a convicted murderer. With only a few months to live, he has been medically paroled to a nursing home, after spending thirty years in prison for the crimes of rape and murder.

As Joe writes about Carl's life, especially Carl's valor in Vietnam, he cannot reconcile the heroism of the soldier with the despicable acts of the convict. Joe, along with his skeptical female neighbor, throws himself into uncovering the truth, but he is hamstrung in his efforts by having to deal with his dangerously dysfunctional mother, the guilt of leaving his autistic brother vulnerable, and a haunting childhood memory.

Thread by thread, Joe unravels the tapestry of Carl's conviction. But as he and Lila dig deeper into the circumstances of the crime, the stakes grow higher. Will Joe discover the truth before it's too late to escape the fallout.

Discussion Questions

1. How did you experience the book? Were you immediately drawn into the story—or did it take you a while? Did the book intrigue, amuse, disturb, alienate, irritate, or frighten you?
2. What aspects of the novel did the author draw from to come up with the title for *The Life We Bury*?
3. Which character, if any, did you identify with the most? Why?
4. Was there a particular scene that resonated with you or stayed with you after you finished the novel?

5. How did you feel about the character of Carl Iverson when he was first introduced?
6. Would you say that the story is plot driven or character driven? In other words, do events unfold quickly? Or is more time spent developing characters' inner lives? Does it make a difference to your enjoyment?
7. How does guilt affect or influence the various characters?
8. What would you say are Joe's strongest character traits?
9. If you could change the character of Joe Talbert, what would you change?

Summary from the publisher and Discussion Questions from the author.