A Guide for Book Clubs

Edge of Summer

Thank you for bringing *Edge of Summer*, the first book in the Anna Ghere Mystery Series, to your group. These questions are grouped by section, so you can take the book in parts or discuss it all at once. Use what is useful and ignore the rest — the best conversations tend to wander off the page anyway. One word of warning: this is a mystery, and the later sections give away the ending. If your group reads in parts, stop where you've reached.

Themes to Explore

The season within a season. Aunt Lo's edge of summer, where "we stand in the breach" between what was and what will be.

Every person matters to someone. A seven-year-old refuses to let a stranger stay a stranger, even when his cross reads *Unknown*.

Secrets and lies of omission. The notions man, a married man calling himself Harry Smith, Aunt Lo's one white lie — and the two secrets Anna keeps.

Who you are underneath. Smitty is Harrison Smith MacDonell, and Jimbo is someone else entirely. Anna holds on to the one thing she knows: "My name is Anna Marie Ghere."

The ordinary sparrow. Anna thinks sparrows "brown and ordinary." Charlie and Popo disagree, Gem's sparrow keeps watch, and Jimbo tells its legend.

Kindness at the back door. Mrs. Parlett's suppers, Paul Lockwood's leftovers, Gus's quiet errands — and how easily that kindness can be used.

What money can and can't buy. Smitty says his riches "pale" beside love. Jimbo says money can buy anything, and he may be right.

A town that talks. Sally at the switchboard, Martha, Alma Mae Butler, Aunt Iris, and the reporter who names the Corpse in the Creek.

Memory as storytelling. An old woman who "boldly" colors a seven-year-old's memories "for the sake of my storytelling."

Discussion Questions

Opening — the lily-of-the-valley, the ice, and Aunt Lo's farewell

1. Mother says the lily-of-the-valley "thrive in the coolness of the shade," behind the barn, "hidden away from our day-to-day lives." What else in this book thrives out of sight?

2. When Anna says a stranger pulled her from the ice and called her by name, Popo jumps to his feet: "He damn well better have been" an angel. Why fear, and not relief?

3. "Pay attention or you'll miss the moment of its coming," Aunt Lo tells Anna. Is there a season like the edge of summer in your own life?

4. Aunt Lo promises the mysteries of summer will "yield a harvest of truth at its edge." Now that you've finished, what was the harvest?

5. "Secrets are burdens far too heavy for seven-year-olds to bear," says Aunt Lo — and Mother won't meet Anna's eyes. Who is carrying a secret at that moment?

The Corpse in the Creek — the discovery and the first questions

6. Popo runs out barefoot to make everything better. Bernard tries to pray the man into heaven: "He didn't budge." How does the book use humor beside death?

7. Mother says, "She's seven years old." Popo says, "We can't protect her from this." Which parent was right — and does the answer change by the end?

8. "He matters to someone," Anna insists. What is she really afraid of when she asks what would happen if it were Popo?

9. The sheriff says folks "have a heart for murder" to keep their minds off the sad state of the nation. Why would a town in hard times want a murder?

The deputies — Hector Toops, Mrs. Parlett, and the rock

10. Gem sees a sparrow above the dead man, its feathers matching his suit, and says, “I wanted to make sure it was real.” What did the sparrow mean to you?

11. “We make memories with other people, not alone,” Mrs. Parlett says of Jimbo. Knowing the ending, was she foolish — or was loneliness the real danger?

12. The girls learn Gus visits Mrs. Parlett and tills her garden unasked, though he’s “not much of a conversationalist.” What does the book say about quiet goodness?

13. Gem: “Keeping your mouth shut is something else entirely.” Bernard: “Hain’t so.” Who’s right?

The hobo camp, the notions man, and the boys come home

14. Mother asks Anna to keep the notions man’s visit from Popo. Was that fair to ask of a child? What was he to Mother — and who left the red boots on the back steps?

15. “There’s never only one rat in the barn,” Boggy says after the hobo camp. Which rats did you suspect at that point?

16. Anna breaks down in Popo’s arms the night the boys come home, the first night she feels safe. Why does grief so often wait for safety?

17. Elijah Barner never asks “Where’s God?” because “He’s right here.” Anna can’t understand why Mother, so joyful in her garden, has “so little faith.” Is Anna right about her?

The cottage in Barner’s Woods

18. The open padlock, the coal bucket, the second mug, the new boots, the peach pie — Anna catches what the grown men miss. Why does the child see more?

19. “You didn’t ask him his real name,” Anna tells the sheriff. Why does a name matter so much to her?

20. In Mother's garden, Anna decides, "The stranger's death was his, not mine." Later Mother warns, "What you think about grows." Can we choose what we carry?

Tee Tee — the letter and Aunt Lo's return

21. Anna hears "your perfect season" in Smitty's letter and knows: "Edge of summer." When did you first suspect Aunt Lo?

22. "I loved the idea of loving him even more," Aunt Lo says, and she would have sacrificed "nothing." Is that honesty, or self-protection?

23. Aunt Lo blames her one white lie for Smitty's death. "Forgiving oneself," Boggy says, "that's the hardest thing of all." Is she to blame?

24. On the courthouse steps, the sheriff names LoRetta Ghere before the whole town. Did he do right by her?

The poorhouse, the party, and Jimbo's confession

25. "Please don't think ill of him," Mackie pleads. "He was a good man." How did your view of Smitty change across the book?

26. "I believe you're living my life, sir," Jimbo tells Smitty, moments before he strikes. What do you make of the revival tent and the preacher with "the shine"?

27. The sheriff sweeps two stacks of cash into his drawer, says "No deal," and lets Jimbo walk out with Adam Barner. How did you feel about Boggy by the last page?

28. "Better the burden of a secret than the burden of the ugly truth," Anna decides. Aunt Lo once said secrets are too heavy for a seven-year-old. Who was right?

29. One word: "Fire." Go back to the initials carved into the table behind the Blue and White, and Popo's story of the piano player's daughter. How does this change the book?

30. "It means God saved you for a reason," Aunt Lo tells Anna. Who do you think pulled Anna and Pauline out of the creek?

Going Deeper

On the epigraph. The novel opens with Hebrews 13:2: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Count the strangers — the man on the ice, the notions man, Smitty, Jimbo at Mrs. Parlett’s door. Which were angels? Is the book testing the verse?

On two heirs. Titus Vandercook and Harrison Smith MacDonell — sons of empires, both Culver men, both running from their fathers’ money. One became a hobo, the other Harry Smith. Adam Barner took the place Titus left behind. What does the book say about inheritance?

On clues in plain sight. “BB LOVES LO” carved into an old table. Gasoline drifting from a locked shed. “A cane?” and Jimbo’s flinch. Smoke from an abandoned cottage on a winter afternoon. Which did you catch the first time?

On Mother. Anna calls her stoic and faithless, yet Mother knows what every flower means, keeps a secret of her own, and is “the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.” Who is Maggie Ghere?

On a child’s eye. Anna listens through air registers, reads faces, notices boots. She sees what the grown-ups miss and misses what only grown-ups would understand. What does a seven-year-old narrator let the book do?

Passages worth reading aloud. Aunt Lo’s “we stand in the breach.” Elijah and Sarah on the porch swing. Mrs. Parlett’s “Madam, I have never been better.” Bernard on Aunt Iris’s beauty sleep. The Legend of the Sparrow. Smitty’s letter to Tee Tee. The last page.

Bringing It to Your Gathering

On the table. Maggie’s honey-poached quince pie — the whole town knows when she’s “deep in the quince.” Roxy’s sugar-cream pie, the one Popo would “kill for.” Dutch apple, Jimbo’s real favorite. Then serve two side by side: strawberry-rhubarb with clover honey, the pie Jimbo claimed, and peach with homemade vanilla ice cream, the pie he ate — see who spots the lie. Biscuits with blackberry jam, chicken and dumplings, MaMaw’s chocolate birthday cake, Mrs. Parlett’s five-bean

salad, fudge and lemonade, Blood Orange soda pop, and Earl Grey in Mrs. Parlett's honor. Pickled eggs, strictly as a dare.

Set the scene. Outdoors on a late summer evening if you can — an old quilt on the grass, popcorn, cicadas, lightning bugs in Mason jars. Cornflowers, black-eyed Susans and asters in a jar. A pair of red rubber boots by the door, and if you can find one, a Walking Liberty half-dollar to pass around.

Things to do together.

- **Gem's diary.** Gem writes everything down. Ask everyone to bring the one detail they think was the real clue, and see how many answers you get.
- **What the flowers mean.** Cornflowers for hope, black-eyed Susans for justice, asters for faith and patience. Bring a flower and say what it means to you.
- **Mrs. Parlett's front walk.** Name someone who might be watching at the window, and plan one visit before the next meeting.
- **The breach.** Go around the table: name a time you stood between what was and what would be.
- **Who pulled Annie out?** Everyone writes down a guess. Seal them in an envelope and open it after the next book in the series.

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