

Mystic River

by Dennis Lehane

William Morrow (an imprint of HarperCollins)

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by May Lee Tom

Leominster Public Library, Leominster, MA

Massachusetts
Award Winner
2002



SUMMARY:

Mystic River is a story about three friends who confront their past and their choices. When Dave, Sean, and Jimmy were eleven, two men posing as policemen lured Dave into a car. Although he escaped, the terrifying incident causes the three friends to grow apart. Finally, their paths cross again twenty-five years later when Sean Devine, a homicide detective, is assigned to investigate the death of Jimmy Marcus's daughter. Dave Boyle is a suspect.

Dennis Lehane wanted to write a book “about normal people thrust into circumstances far beyond them and forced to deal with questions—about love and loyalty and friendship and family, vengeance and blood lust and the evil within both themselves and the world around them—that they would prefer never to confront.”¹

Mystic River was a finalist for the L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award that honors books about New England or by New England authors. It has won additional recognition from the Anthony Award for outstanding mystery, the Barry Award for best novel, and the Dilys Award presented by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does the Mystic River symbolize? What other metaphors do you find in this story?
2. What is the significance of the two quotes that appear at the beginning of the book?
3. How did Dave's abduction affect Sean, Jimmy, and Dave individually? How did it affect those around them?

¹ <http://www.dennislehanebooks.com/about.asp> 5/13/2004

4. Jimmy knew that he somehow contributed to Katie's death, but he didn't know how (page 235). What role did he have in his daughter's death?
5. What social issues are addressed in the book?
6. Why would Celeste help Dave get rid of the evidence? Why would she then tell Jimmy that she thought her husband killed his daughter?
7. Why would Annabeth choose not to stop Jimmy from committing a murder? What did she mean when she said "everyone is weak" but them?
8. Jimmy has a recurring dream where Ray Harris tells him, "You can't outrun a train." (page 368) What did Ray mean by that?
9. What is your idea of a hero? Does the description apply to Jimmy?
10. How is the neighborhood important to the story?
11. Are the characters believable? What personality traits does the author give them? Which character stands out?
12. What do you think of the author's use of language and dialogue? Read out loud your favorite passage. Why did you choose it?
13. The author uses several points of view to tell the story. Was this an effective way to structure the book? Why or why not? If you could choose another character's voice, whose would you pick and how would it affect the story?
14. If the story were to continue, what direction do you imagine would it take?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Lehane, the youngest of five children, was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, to Irish immigrants. His father was employed as a warehouse foreman and his mother worked in a school cafeteria.

He grew up in Dorchester, Massachusetts during the 1970s when it was "reeling from poverty, street violence (particularly against forced busing), lethal street drugs...and an alarming suicide rate."² At the same time, it was a very close-knit community where outsiders were not trusted or welcome.

Despite his parents' concerns, Lehane wanted to be a writer. He received a scholarship and moved to St. Petersburg, Florida. He has a B.A.S. in Creative Writing from Eckerd

² Dunn, Adam. "A good place to die," Book, March 2001, p. 52.

College and a M.F.A. from Florida International University. He counseled mentally handicapped and emotionally disturbed children while he attended college.

He has since returned to Massachusetts and went on to write the acclaimed Patrick Kenzie and Angela Gennaro series:

A Drink Before the War, 1994
Darkness, Take My Hand, 1996
Sacred, 1997
Gone, Baby, Gone, 1998
Prayers for Rain, 1999

His most recent novel, *Shutter Island*, came out in April 2003. He is currently working on a trilogy about the 1918 Boston police strike, the outcome, and repercussions.

Lehane is a writer of short stories as well. "Running Out of Dog," is among Tony Hillerman's *Best American Mystery Stories of the Century*, 2000. "Until Gwen" appears in the June 2004 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine.

He also wrote, directed, and produced a film, titled *Neighborhoods*.

In an interview last year with *Publishers Weekly*, Lehane said that he had some great teachers. As such, he wanted to give something back. He now serves on the faculty of the Stonecoast M.F.A. in Creative Writing program at the University of Southern Maine.

HELPFUL LINKS:

<http://www.dennislehanebooks.com> (May 13, 2004)

<http://www.bookreporter.com/authors/au-lehane-dennis.asp> (May 13, 2004)

<http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/lehane.html> (May 13, 2004)

Other Background Information:

Abbott, Jillian. "Three writers on plot: Dennis Lehane, Gaffe Lynds and Stuart Woods tell you how to create a great plot," *The Writer* 117 (May 2004):16. *Biography Resource Center. Gale Group*. Document number A116288095. (June 18, 2004).

Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, volume 112, pp. 187-190. (Detroit: Gale Research Co.)

"Damn Yankees: two hot talents in detective fiction," *The Economist* (May 12, 2001):1. *General Reference Center Gold. Gale Group*. (June 7, 2004).

Dunn, Adam. "A good place to die," *Book* (March 2001):52. *General Reference Center Gold. Gale Group*. (June 7, 2004).

Jones, Louise. "Dennis Lehane: hard-boiled in Boston," *Publishers Weekly* 246 (June 21, 1999):40. *General Reference Center Gold. Gale Group*. (June 7, 2004).

- Jones, Malcolm. "Mean Street makeover: Lehane puts his stylish stamp on crime fiction," *Newsweek* (Feb. 19, 2001):58. *General Reference Center Gold*. Gale Group. (June 7, 2004).
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