



The Murder of Sonny Liston Reader's Guide

PLEASE NOTE: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the book. If you have not finished reading *The Murder of Sonny Liston*, we respectfully suggest that you wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Las Vegas is a major character in *The Murder of Sonny Liston*. As Assael writes, Liston lived on a golf course “where gin and tonics flowed freely in the early afternoon” and “kids played on the streets and lawns, blithely unaware that [not everyone lived] with Frank Sinatra winking at them from the fourth fairway.” What about the culture of Las Vegas in 1970 interested you? How did it reflect and how did it differ from the upheaval that America was going through at the time? What was the lasting impact of that era?
2. The heavyweight crown was one of the world’s most prestigious trophies in the twentieth century. How did Sonny Liston fit into the string of American champions that included Joe Louis and Floyd Patterson? What distinguished him as a cultural and political figure?
3. Sonny Liston was reviled equally by white Americans, who saw him as a mob-controlled thug, and black Americans, who feared that his image would set the civil rights struggle back. What do you think Liston’s responsibility was to the civil rights movement? Should he have been criticized for not helping the cause? Compare and contrast him to Muhammad Ali.
4. One of the key revelations in the book comes from a source who heard Liston brag that he was due to get a cut of Ali’s future earnings, since he had taken that first-round fall in their 1965 fight. Watch the video known as the “Phantom Punch” on YouTube and discuss with the group: Do you believe that Liston took a dive? How does the book inform your opinion? Might the fight have had something to do with Liston’s death?
5. The mob has a long and legendary history in Las Vegas. But as the book notes, in 1970, “the cozy days of mob control were fading and a new era of corporate gaming was at hand.” Which era of Las Vegas—the mob era or the corporate—would you prefer to live through?
6. *The Murder of Sonny Liston* is at heart a police procedural, in which the author becomes a cold-case cop to solve what he argues was a homicide. What did you like about the way he approached his subject? What would you have done differently?
7. In 1970, undercover drug agent John Sutton drove into Las Vegas in a “two-tone blue Buick Electra 225 with mirrored rims and a horn that blared ‘La Cucaracha,’” and tried to lure Liston into selling him cocaine. The agent failed on his first try. But Sutton later told the author that he believed he would have succeeded on his second. And if he had, he said, he would have put a wire on Liston and asked him to rat out his friends. Judging from the book’s portrayal of Liston,

