



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,

do you think he would have cooperated with the government? What do you think would have happened if he had?

8. Assael writes that “for all of its sophistication, Las Vegas was an unforgiving place . . . and it took a mean and unapologetic police force to hold it together.” Taking into account the stories in the book, what do you think about the way the Las Vegas police did their jobs? How did policing then compare with policing today?
9. Sonny Liston had a long and ignominious history with law enforcement. The book cites the recollections of a federal drug agent who was part of a local house party raid in which Liston was the only person released. The agent believed the boxer had a guardian angel on the local police force, and so did the subject of the raid, who allegedly later took a contract out on Liston’s life. Given Liston’s long and checkered history with the police, is it likely he would have been an informant?
10. Geraldine Liston called the police to report her husband’s death on January 5, 1971; the detectives who came to investigate reported finding a bindle of heroin lying in plain view. Assael argues that the most likely scenario is that the police planted it, and concludes there is little basis to believe that the boxer overdosed on heroin. Consider how the Las Vegas police did their jobs in that era; do you think they may have planted the evidence?
11. Assael details five characters whom he proposes as leading suspects in the murder of Sonny Liston:
 - (a) The beautician turned drug dealer Earl Cage.
 - (b) The legendary jazz trumpeter turned gang leader Red Rodney.
 - (c) The bookie turned high-powered casino executive Ash Resnick.
 - (d) The con man turned police informant Irwin Peters.
 - (e) The hero cop turned coke-dealing ex-con Larry Gandy.

Assign one or more members of the book club to represent each of these men and—keeping in mind the evidence presented in the book—debate who had the most compelling motive to kill Sonny Liston. Who do you think killed Sonny Liston?

12. If you could reopen the case today, what would you do? How would you have investigated Liston’s death differently?

Suggested Reading

Nick Tosches, *The Devil and Sonny Liston*

David Remnick, *King of the World*

Nick Pileggi, *Casino: Love and Honor in Las Vegas*

A. S. Young, *Sonny Liston: The Champ Nobody Wanted*

Paul Gallender, *The Real Story Behind the Ali–Liston Fights*

Rob Sneddon, *The Phantom Punch: The Story Behind Boxing’s Most Controversial Bout*