



Live by Night

By Dennis Lehane
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Questions for Discussion

- Live by Night* begins with Joe Coughlin in a tub of cement surrounded by armed men on a boat heading out to sea. How does this opening foreshadow the story that unfolds?
- Joe, the youngest son of Thomas Coughlin, a high-ranking member of the Boston Police Department, was born into a socially respected and accomplished family. How did he fall into a life of crime? Think about his relationship with his father. How are the two men alike? Did they love each other? Did they respect each other?
- Talk about Prohibition America as it is portrayed in *Live by Night*. Do you see any similarities with twenty-first-century America? Why does Joe thrive in this world?
- Joe's first boss, Tim Hickey, tells him, "the people we service, they visit the night. But we live in it. They rent what we own." What is the "night"? What is the significance of the title *Live by Night*? Joe tells his older brother Danny, "the night. It's got its own set of rules." What are those rules? What is the darkness inside Joe that draws him to the night? Why does he prefer the night's rules to those of the day? Joe also tells him, "there are no rules but the ones a man makes for himself." How does making individual rules work in Joe's world? If we all made our own rules, what kind of society would we have?
- Tim also offers Joe several pieces of advice. "The smallest mistake sometimes cast the longest shadow," and "when a house falls down, the first termite to bite into it is just as much to blame as the last." How do you interpret Tim's wisdom? How are his insights reflected in the events of Joe's life? What about Joe's future bosses, Albert White and Maso Pescatore?
- Everything changes for Joe when he meets Emma Gould. Why does Joe fall in love with her? When his father meets her, he tells Joe she's "dead inside." Explain his observation. Emma does not like Joe's father either, and classifies him as one of those people, "who confuse being lucky with being better." She tells Joe, "We're not less than you." Who is the "we" she is talking about and why does she say this? Do successful people—especially those who have done well financially—think they are better than those less well off? Does wealth make someone "better"? Are the assessments Emma Gould and Thomas Coughlin make about each other correct?
- Throughout the story, Joe insists that he isn't a gangster, he's an outlaw. How does he define each? Do you think they are different? If Joe isn't a gangster, who is? Joe believes his father "a pillar of the City on the Hill, the Athens of America, Hub of the Universe" was more criminal than he could ever be, thanks to a lifetime of "payoffs and kickbacks and graft." Is he right? Does Joe's honesty about himself make him nobler or just more honest than his father?
- Joe's father tells him, "People don't fix each other, Joseph. And they never become anything but what they've been." He also tells him, "the foundation of all lives is luck." What do you think of both of these statements? Can we change our circumstances and our lives? Does luck make a person's life? What does it say for those who are successful and those who are not? Joe argues with his father, "You make your luck, Dad." Can we make our own luck? How can we do so and how do we recognize it when it happens? Do you think most people recognize luck when it comes their way?
- Talk about Joe's relationship with Maso Pescatore. What kind of man is Maso? How does he stand up to comparisons with Thomas Coughlin? What does Joe learn from Maso?
- Thomas Coughlin gives Joe his beloved pocket watch. Why? What significance does the watch hold for both father and son? Do you think Joe will pass the watch down to his own child?
- Joe says he doesn't believe in an afterlife. "You didn't die and go to a better place; this was the better place because you weren't dead. Heaven wasn't in the clouds; it was the air in your lungs." If there is nothing else besides this life, what stops people from taking all they can? Do we need religious values to keep us moral? Is Joe an ethical man? Does he have his own code of honor? How would you define it?
- How does Joe's life change when he meets Graciela? What draws the two together? Does she remind him of Emma? What does she offer him that the night does not?
- When Joe arrives in Ybor, he meets its lawman, Chief Irving Figgis. Figgis tells Joe he's "incorruptible." Is anyone free from temptation? How does the chief's daughter, Loretta, test this assessment? What impact does she have on Joe and his business? How would Joe characterize Loretta?
- Joe occasionally dreams of a panther. What does the animal represent and when does it appear to him?
- Religious revivals and bootleg liquor were embraced throughout the 1930s. What draws people to either or both during hard times like the Depression?

16. Where would Joe fit in today's world?

17. *Live by Night* interweaves themes of class, race, money, power, honor, and betrayal. Choose one and trace its arc through the story, showing how it reverberates in any of the characters' lives. What insights does it offer for our lives today? How much has America changed since the 1930s?

18. What intrigued you most while reading *Live by Night*?