

The Big Eddy Club: Reading Group Guide

The book opens with a description of the Big Eddy Club. What is the club's significance for the black and white communities of Columbus, Georgia, and what does this tell us about the relationship between them?

By the middle of the 1990s, the Columbus courts had sent more men to death row than anywhere else in Georgia. What do their legal officials seem to feel about the death penalty? What explains their apparent enthusiasm for using it?

In September 1977, the first of seven white women were raped and murdered, apparently by an African-American. What was the impact of the killings on the city? Did the crimes' racial dimension add to their horror, and if so, why?

Discuss the concept of historical memory, especially in relation to the "Lost Cause" legend and its manifestation in Columbus. How might the memory of events such as the murders of G.W. Ashburn and Thomas H. Brewer have affected black vs. white responses to the stocking stranglings case?

Discuss the process by which, more than six years after the final murder, Carlton Gary became a suspect. Do you find Detective Sellers's account persuasive? How much did Gary's record of crimes in upstate New York affect the thinking of the police and prosecutors, and how much might it have influenced the jury at his trial?

Discuss the role of Judge John Land in the Gary case, his background as the son of the alleged lynch mob leader A.B. Land, his career as a political segregationist and his cover-up of the assassination of Thomas H. Brewer. Did this background and history effect his decisions with regard to Gary? Do you find the regret he expresses in his interviews with the author persuasive?

Why did Bud Siemon take on the Gary case when he knew he would likely receive no funding? He paid a high personal price, but do you think he did the best job for his client?

Five of the victims were members or regular visitors to the big Eddy Club, together with many of the officials involved in trying Gary. How might this have influenced the case?

Discuss the course of Gary's trial, and consider its most dramatic moments, such as the identification of Gary by Gertrude Miller, the disclosure of his record in upstate New York, and Detective Sellers's testimony about his alleged confession. Would you have reached the same verdict if you were on the jury?

Now perform the same exercise again, but this time, take into consideration all the evidence that was hidden from the jury: the bite cast, Gary's status as a strong secretor, Gertrude Miller's prior identifications of other suspects, the size nine footprints found at the crime scenes in Albany, New York and at Ruth Schwob's house, and the fact that Richard Smith had Gary's fingerprints compared with the strangling crime scene marks in 1979 when, apparently, they did not match. Would

you have reached a different verdict if you had been a juror and known about the suppressed evidence?

Do you think that Detective Sellers's testimony about Gary's alleged confession was true or persuasive? Do you think the method that he said he used to record it was acceptable?

Discuss the behavior of the state towards the crime scene semen samples and the bite cast made from the wound on Janet Cofer's breast. Do you agree that the semen samples might have been a biohazard, and do you find that District Attorney William Smith's explanation as to why he did not use the cast at the trial was honest? Why might the state have acted in this manner?

The book claims that William Smith lied directly to the jury in his closing summation at the trial. Should this in itself be enough to secure a new trial for Gary?

Supporters of the death penalty often state that the possibility of executing an innocent person is very small, because of the rigorous scrutiny afforded by the lengthy appeals process. How well do you think this has worked in Gary's case? Do the complex procedural rules that govern such appeals ensure fairness, or make the execution of an innocent person more likely?

Discuss the character of Carlton Gary. Does he appear to you likely to have been a serial killer? How significant might it be that he continued to live in Columbus for almost a year after the final murder?

Does the fact that Gary may have committed serious crimes outside Georgia mean that the author's lengthy investigation is, in the end, redundant, or is a fair trial process a desirable end in itself? Should the state have been allowed to claim that he had been responsible for crimes in New York for which he had never been charged, much less convicted?

Death penalty abolitionists often say that capital trials often amount to "legal lynching?" Is this the case here? And if so, how might it be connected to the history of lynching by mobs in Columbus?

More than 80 per cent of executions today take place in the states of the former Confederacy. Why do you think this is so, and how does this book illuminate the possible reasons? Do you agree with Professor David Garland that the death penalty today fills some of the same social and political needs that were once met by lynching?

In May 2007, Judge Clay Land of the federal district court in Columbus refused to grant Gary a new trial on the basis of the bite cast, stating that although it was possible that the jury might have reached a different verdict, it was not "probable," given the existence of other evidence such as the confession and fingerprints. Do you agree with his decision? What does it say about the integrity of American justice, and the way state courts are supposed to be policed by the U.S. constitution and the federal legal system?

In September 2007, Gary had his final hearing in the Eleventh Circuit Federal Court of Appeals. Judge Hilary Anderson described the behavior of the state in relation to the bite cast as “absolutely terrible and unethical,” and stated that if she were the attorney general of Georgia, she would order an investigation. As of this writing in December 2007, the court has not reached a decision. If it finds against Gary, it is likely he will be executed: the Supreme Court only takes a small proportion of the death cases filed with it. What would you think if he were put to death?

The book ends on an optimistic note, with the author stating that Columbus has changed considerably in the years spanned by his visits. Do you think this change is real or superficial, and is it likely to continue? Will it eventually spread to the courts of Columbus and the landings of Georgia’s death row? What might be done to speed things up?

Has the book affected your thinking about the death penalty? If so, how?