OFFICIAL BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Hard Faith

A Final Memoir

by Ray Lopez

BOOK THREE OF THE HARD KNOCKS TRILOGY

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for choosing *Hard Faith* for your book club. This is the final memoir of the trilogy: *Hard Knocks* was the boy, *Hard Love* was the love that found him, and *Hard Faith* is what that love grew into over the years, through all that is good and bad. I didn't write it from a mountaintop. I wrote it from hospital rooms and a gym floor, from a street corner in Bridgeport and the far side of a winter I barely made it through — and I can tell you that faith held. Not the soft kind. The hard kind: tough, tested, and true. I hope your conversation is honest. Mine had to be.

— Ray

Discussion Questions

Use these prompts to spark your conversation — feel free to skip around or focus on the moments that resonated most with your group.

1. **First Impressions — A "Final" Memoir:** The book calls itself *A Final Memoir*, and Paula's foreword opens with Hebrews 11:1 — faith as "the substance of things hoped for." What did you expect from a final memoir, and how did the living, fighting, still-unfolding story you found compare? How did Paula's refrain — "for such a time as this" — shape the way you read everything that followed?

2. **Opening Hook — Princess Wenonah Drive:** The book opens mid-flight, with Ray crying as California falls away, and lands in Shelton, Connecticut — on a steep driveway that becomes his "nemesis," tears his calf, and leaves him limping into his first day of work while his marriage is under strain. Why do you think he begins the final memoir with a move, an injury, and a James Taylor concert the couple walks out of, rather than with a triumph?

3. **Character Motivation — The Officer and the Evangelist:** By day Ray supervises Leona Helmsley, Latin Kings, and mob figures; whenever God opens a door, he shares his faith with the same people. Where did you see tension between the probation officer and the evangelist — and where did you see that they are, in fact, the same man? What drives him more: the sentence he has to write, or the soul in front of him?

4. **Supporting Cast — Paula:** Paula writes the foreword, finishes her dissertation, earns tenure, leads the family to church after church — and, in Ray's darkest winter, tells him, "Get out of bed… YOU HAVE TO FIGHT."

How does this book read as a marriage story as much as a memoir? What does Paula's faith do that Ray's doesn't, and what does his do that hers doesn't?

5. **Setting as a Character — Corners, Gyms, and Hospital Rooms:** Bridgeport's street corners, the hardcore floor of South Side Gym, the Huntington Chapel, hospital corridors in Connecticut and in Peru. How do the places of this book carry its mood and its turning points? Which setting felt most alive to you — and could this story have happened anywhere else?

6. **Core Theme — What Makes Faith "Hard"?** In the foreword, Paula defines hard faith as faith that is tough, challenging, undeniable, unbreakable, true. Ray prays for his friend Rich's healing all the way through ALS; he sits with his mother after her stroke steals her speech. Where is faith hardest in this book — and what is the difference between hard faith and easy faith?

7. **Secrets & Turning Points — "Evangelist, Evangelist, Evangelist":** A visiting prophet who knows nothing about Ray speaks his father's old refrain over him — the School of Hard Knocks — and a calling: he will evangelize "the hardcore, one at a time." Later, Ray describes hearing God's voice three times: "3:19," "Hey Ray," and "Good job." How did you receive those scenes? What do they change in him, and in the direction of his life?

8. **Moral Gray Areas — Gray Lines:** Ray offers Scripture to defendants during presentence interviews, knowing one federal defender called it inappropriate; as an insider, he also walks readers through the sentencing guidelines and the crack-to-powder disparity he watched land hardest on Black and Latino defendants. Where did you find yourself agreeing with his choices, and where did you wrestle with them? Where should the lines be for a man in his position?

9. **Memorable Passage — The Poet's Eye:** The memoir is threaded with poems — "Stroke," "Chess With Jesse," "The Looking Glass" — and with small scenes that carry enormous weight: a mother's necklace hung on a rearview mirror, a corner in Bridgeport renamed for the man who prayed there, a friend in a rain-soaked car saying, "Ray. I meant it." Which passage, poem or prose, stayed with you after you closed the book — and why?

10. **The Valley — The Winter of My Depression:** After his father's death, Ray — a man of loud, public faith — sinks into clinical depression, is diagnosed in December 2018, and starts medication, all while wondering whether needing it means his faith is too weak. What does his honesty about depression, suicidal thoughts, and treatment offer readers who have been told that faith and medicine can't coexist? What finally gets him out of bed?

11. **The Ending & Beyond — "And So It Goes":** The book, and the trilogy, close with a poem that lands on Galatians 5:6: "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." After everything — the stroke, the corner, Rich, Peru, Mary, the winter — is that a satisfying final word? What will you carry from Ray's trilogy into your own life?

Enhance Your Book Club Meeting

Meeting Element	Book-Inspired Idea

Themed Playlist	Music runs through this book — Ray sang in the gospel quartet Kingdom Bound and at bedsides. Play the soundtrack of *Hard Faith* as your group gathers: • **"There Was Jesus"** — Dolly Parton & Zach Williams. The song Paula names in her foreword as the one that narrates Ray's journey. • **"That's What Faith Can Do"** — Kutless. Mary and Steve's wedding song, sung for them by Ray and Paula. • **"I Can Only Imagine"** — MercyMe. The song Ray sang to Mary in her final moments. • **"God Bless the U.S.A."** — Lee Greenwood. Kingdom Bound sang it before a grieving crowd the Friday after 9/11. • **"Fire and Rain"** — James Taylor. From the Jones Beach concert on the hard first summer back east.
Atmosphere	Make it "Poppo's Corner." For two years Ray brought a box of coffee to a Bridgeport street corner every morning so his friend could offer it to anyone who passed. Set out coffee and donuts, corner-style, and let your meeting run on the book's own fuel: showing up, one morning and one person at a time.
Icebreaker Activity	**For Such a Time as This.** Go around the room: each person names one "small moment" — a corner, a hospital hallway, a phone call — where they can now see God's hand positioning them, the way Paula's foreword traces through Ray's whole life. One sentence each is enough; it sets the table for everything *Hard Faith* is about.
Further Reading	If your group wants the whole journey, start where Ray did: *Hard Knocks* (Book One) and *Hard Love: A California Memoir* (Book Two). For a single-meeting read, try *The Painter*, his novella based on true stories from his years as a federal probation officer, and his newest, *The Second Coming of Joan*. All royalties from *Hard Faith* are donated to the ALS Association — one more reason to pass it on.

Invite Ray to Your Meeting

Ray loves connecting with book clubs. If your group is reading one of his books, he would be glad to drop into your meeting via Zoom or FaceTime for a free 15-minute Q&A — and, if your group would like, to close your time together in prayer.

Request a visit through the Contact page at **raylbooks.com**: choose "Book Club Visit," tell us which book you read and your meeting date, and Ray will respond directly. While you're there, join his reader list for new guides, sample chapters, and signed-copy announcements.