OFFICIAL BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Painter

by Ray Lopez

A Novella Based on True Stories

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for choosing *The Painter* for your book club, and for being willing to sit with a hard story. In my years as a federal probation officer, I met men the world had written off — men who had done terrible things and believed, as Gio did, that hell was the only door still open to them. This novella grew out of those years, and out of the cases and the people I met along the way. If it leaves you with one thought, I hope it is this: no one in these pages — and no one you know — is beyond the reach of God's grace.

— Ray Lopez

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 · FIRST IMPRESSIONS

For most of the novella, Gio is a Mafia hit man — the painting of the title doesn't appear until well into his prison years. When did the title *The Painter* finally click for you, and how did it change the way you saw the man you'd been reading about?

2 · OPENING HOOK

The book opens in the middle of a hit: Sinatra on the radio, a comfortable victim, and — at the very moment Gio raises his pistol — sunlight on his cheek carrying him back to a Sicilian vineyard when he was five years old. What did that collision of beauty and murder do to you as a reader? Did you catch yourself feeling something for Gio that surprised you?

3 · CHARACTER MOTIVATION

At his sentencing, Gio does the unthinkable: he confesses to the murder in open court and admits he was a capo — the first time anyone had openly admitted the existence of La Cosa Nostra in an American courtroom. It can't help him legally, and he knows it. Gio says he confessed because he believed he was going to hell and hoped confession might be his one chance to be saved. Do you read that moment as courage, desperation, faith — or all three?

4 · SUPPORTING CAST

God reaches Gio through a whole relay of people: his son Gio Jr., who forgives him first; Hector, the old lifer whose prayer over Alex echoes down the years; Alex "Big Ears" Martinez, the gang leader turned evangelist; Greta Jones, the art teacher; and even Agent Taurino, who lied to him. Which of these people affected you most — and what does the relay itself say about how grace usually travels?

5 · SETTING AS A CHARACTER

Gio spends a year in the SHU — an 8-by-10 cell, a light that never fully goes out, no clock, no window. He becomes convinced the cell is shrinking and hears demons whispering in the walls. Gio himself later wonders if Big Sandy was his purgatory. How does Lopez use solitary confinement — as a place, a punishment, a spiritual battleground, or all of these at once?

6 · CORE THEME

Prosecutor Paul Danbury lives by the phrase "this is this" — be prepared, control what you can, never surrender. Gio's story runs on a different engine: Romans 8:28, the promise that God works all things together for good. The lie that put Gio in solitary became, in his own words, "the best thing that ever happened to me." Where do you see God's providence at work in this story — and where is it hardest to see?

7 · SECRETS & TURNING POINTS

One verse — Romans 10:9 — brackets Gio's whole journey: his mother whispers it to him in Italian in the darkness of his cell ("Romani dieci, nove"), and nearly two years later Alex quotes the same verse across a library table, and Gio breaks. Which moment do you consider the true turning point — the vision in the SHU, or the prayer with Alex? Why do you think so much time had to pass between them?

8 · MORAL GRAY AREAS

Danbury calls his methods "cheating fair." His first plan — pressuring another inmate to cut Gio — is so ugly that Agent Taurino refuses it, yet Taurino goes along with the lie about a contract on Gio's life, the lie that lands Gio in solitary for a year. How do you judge Taurino? And does it change your answer that the SHU year became the doorway to everything that followed?

9 · MORAL GRAY AREAS · THE LIMITS OF GRACE

Gio argues his own case against himself: murder is a mortal sin, and he points to the thief on the cross who never asked for forgiveness. Judge Frederic Block, endorsing this book, marveled at a murderer who "really did get religion." Did you believe Gio's conversion? What convinced you — or what held you back? Is there anyone in this story you think is beyond redemption?

10 · MEMORABLE PASSAGE

Every reader seems to carry one scene out of this book: a mother's voice and the smell of lemons in a dark cell; a portrait painted in a trance while a whole classroom watches; Gio

telling the agent who lied to him, “You are forgiven.” Which scene or line has stayed with you, and why do you think it lodged so deep?

11 · THE ENDING & BEYOND

At the end, Gio refuses to sign a cooperation agreement and expects nothing in return — he helps because he believes obedience requires it. He is released anyway, and his final scene is a classroom, where he opens his first day as an art therapy counselor with Greta’s own words. Meanwhile, in a courthouse holding cell, Danbury tells him he got saved too. Do you believe Danbury? And what do you imagine for Gio’s life after the last page?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB MEETING

Themed Refreshments	***Chicken Parmesan à la Camille’s.*** In the novella, Camille’s restaurant is where agents and prosecutors meet over chicken parmesan — and years later, it’s where a free Gio finds work and a second chance. Serve this classic in his honor (serves 4–6): • 4–6 boneless chicken breasts, pounded thin • 1 cup flour; 2 eggs, beaten; 1½ cups Italian breadcrumbs with ½ cup grated Parmesan • 3 cups marinara sauce (your favorite jarred or homemade Sunday sauce) • 8 oz fresh mozzarella, sliced; extra Parmesan; fresh basil • Olive oil, salt, pepper, garlic powder Dredge the chicken in flour, egg, then breadcrumb mixture. Pan-fry in olive oil until golden, about 4 minutes per side. Spoon marinara into a baking dish, lay the cutlets over it, top with more sauce, mozzarella, and Parmesan. Bake at 400°F for 15–20 minutes, until the cheese bubbles. Rest 5 minutes, shower with basil, and serve over spaghetti with a green salad and crusty bread.
Atmosphere	Set a Sicilian-American table: a red-and-white checked cloth, candles in the center — a quiet nod to the candles young Gio lit beside the altar, holding his mother’s hand — and Frank Sinatra and the Italian standards playing low in the background, the way they do in the car on that June day in 1988.
Icebreaker Activity	**A Word at the Right Time.** Twice in this book, a few spoken words change everything — Hector’s “God knows, you know,” and a mother’s “Romani dieci, nove.” Go around the circle: share a verse,

	a saying, or a single line that someone gave you at exactly the moment you needed it — or one you would hand to somebody standing where Gio stood.
Further Reading	More from Ray Lopez: his memoir trilogy — *Hard Knocks*, *Hard Love*, and *Hard Faith* — tells his own story of addiction, faith, and a 26-year career in federal probation; and his novel *The Second Coming of Joan* asks what happens when God sends a woman. All are available at raylbooks.com.

INVITE RAY TO YOUR MEETING

Ray loves book clubs — and he'd be glad to join yours. Invite him to drop in for a **free 15-minute Q&A by Zoom or FaceTime** during your meeting: bring your hardest questions about Gio, about grace, about the stories behind the story.

To schedule, just reach out through the Contact page at **raylbooks.com**.