OFFICIAL BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Hard Love

A California Memoir

by **Ray Lopez**

BOOK TWO OF THE HARD KNOCKS TRILOGY

A Note from the Author

Thank you for bringing *Hard Love* to your book club. It means more to me than you know.

Paula and I landed in California the day after my twenty-first birthday with a couple of suitcases, no money to speak of, and a love we believed would be enough. California is where I became a man — where I worked the mountain at Los Pinos with boys the world had given up on, where I put down the bottle, found a church, earned my degrees, bought a home, and watched my daughter come into the world. But none of it came easy, and none of it came in my own strength. Love — God's love, and the love of a wife who would not yield — is hard the way a foundation is hard: solid and firm, so a life can be built on it.

If this book leaves you with one thing, let it be this: whatever road is in front of you, you do not have to walk it in your own strength. You won't have to.

— Ray Lopez

Discussion Questions

1. First Impressions

Before Ray tells a single story, his wife Paula's foreword builds the whole book around dictionary definitions of the word *hard* — "not easily yielding to pressure," "demanding the exertion of energy," "so as to be solid or firm." What did that framing lead you to expect? By the last page, which definition do you think fits this marriage — and this faith — best?

2. The Opening Hook

The memoir opens with the couple's first Pacific sunset at San Clemente: Paula wades into the ocean in her sundress, loses her wallet — with all her identification — to the waves, and comes out laughing. Ray reads it as a baptism, pairing the scene with Ephesians 4:22–24 about putting off the old self. Why is this the right doorway into the book? What "old self" is each of them leaving in that water?

3. Character Motivation

Interviewing for the counselor job at Los Pinos, barely two months off probation himself, Ray is asked if he has ever been arrested — and after a pause, he tells the truth, release certificate in hand. Lying would have been easier and safer. What does that moment reveal about the man he is trying to become? Where else in the book does he choose the harder honesty when a lie would have cost him less?

4. Supporting Cast

Ray's road is crowded with people who carry him at key moments: Carlos Rosas, who hired him because Ray reminded Carlos of himself; Stan Wolfe, the recovering-alcoholic counselor who "stays close" for three days; Pat Thomas, fearless with a rattlesnake; and above all Paula — working two jobs, earning her degrees, and deepening in faith ahead of him. Which supporting figure most changed Ray's trajectory? How does Paula's role differ from all the others?

5. Setting as a Character

California is practically a character in this memoir: the sunsets and surf breaks of San Clemente, the Ortega "Highway of Death" climbing to Los Pinos, Berkeley's bookstores and protests, and a little house on Lowell Avenue in Richmond, a mile from where "death lives around the corner." How does California form Ray — and what does it cost him and Paula? Why does the story need both Southern California and the Bay Area?

6. Core Theme — Hard Love

The title cuts several ways at once. Ray admits, "I'm still angry much of the time, which makes loving me hard." Paula's foreword insists love is hard "in a good way." And running underneath is God's hard pursuit of a man who kept running. Where do you see hard love most clearly in this book — in the marriage, in Ray's work with the boys at Los Pinos and the Boys' Treatment Center, or in God's pursuit of Ray? Defend your answer with a scene.

7. Secrets & Turning Points

The hinge of the book is quiet: on a Monday morning, after a blackout night when he left Paula alone in her grief, Ray pours a glass of red wine, watches the sun fire through it — and puts it down, never to drink again after fourteen years. Why does the turning come there, and then? What part do guilt, Stan Wolfe's plain naming of his bondage, and grace each play in it?

8. Moral Gray Areas

Ray refuses to clean up his own story. He saws down the neighbors' view-blocking trees at midnight with his brother Steve, then sips coffee with the landscaper the next morning and lies about it. He drives drunk — while employed as a probation counselor. And he learns his promotion to supervisor was rearranged in his favor because of his protected-class status, which enrages him. How does his candor about the gray areas affect your trust in him as a narrator? Where did you find yourself judging him — and where forgiving him?

9. Memorable Passage

The memoir is threaded with Ray's poems and with Scripture, from the Romans 7:15 epigraph ("what I hate I do") to "Mi Hermanos," his plea to the gang boys asking why brothers kill each other. Which passage stayed with you most — a poem, a scene, or a verse? Consider Oscar, the fifteen-year-old on Ray's caseload; Paula descending the bluff in her $13 flea-market wedding gown; or Ray rising from the baptismal water into a beam of sunlight. What made yours stick?

10. Faith's Slow Work

For years Ray describes himself as "an infant Christian, drinking spiritual milk" — praying mostly when he was scared — even as Paula's faith deepens and Judson Memorial Baptist Church becomes the family's anchor. How does this book portray faith as slow formation rather than a single dramatic conversion? What did that church family give Ray, Paula, and Tebben that nothing else in California had?

11. The Ending & Beyond

A California memoir ends with leaving California: a twelve-hour airport delay, a stranger's kindness, and Ray weeping as the red-eye lifts off — "I feel a part of me dying" — closing on Philippians 4:13. Years earlier he had seen the light fading in Paula's eyes and promised her they would go home. What does that promise cost him, and what does it teach him about love? What do you expect *Hard Faith*, the final book of the trilogy, will have to reckon with?

Enhance Your Book Club Meeting

The Playlist — "Sailing" and Other Songs of the Journey. Music marks every turn of Ray and Paula's road. Build your meeting soundtrack from the songs woven through the book:

- **"Sailing" — Christopher Cross.** "One of our songs" — heard on the radio all through their courtship, sung by Ray in a rowboat on Wells Lake while Paula rowed, and playing over the speakers at LAX the moment they arrive in California.
- **"With You I'm Born Again" — Billy Preston & Syreeta.** Their wedding duet, sung to each other on the beach on Christmas Day, 1981 — and the song Ray plays down the phone line for Paula on a Valentine's Day when she is 3,000 miles away.

- **Classic rock and Spanish folk.** The blend Ray hears pouring out of the cars on the freeway their first California evening — queue up some Santana and Eagles alongside it, and let the room argue about which coast has the better soundtrack.

Set the Atmosphere. Meet at golden hour if you can. Ray and Paula's California begins with a sunset at the San Clemente Pier — Paula sprinting for the water, the sky going pink, orange, and lavender. Dim the lights, put the playlist on low, and open a map of the journey on the table: Long Island to San Clemente, up the Ortega Highway to Los Pinos, and north to Berkeley and Richmond. Tracing the road together makes the discussion richer.

Icebreaker — "The Curb and the Suitcase." The day before Paula left New York, she came home to find everything she owned bagged on the curb — her old life, put out by a mother who couldn't bear to lose her. Go around the room: if you were leaving your old life behind with two suitcases, what is one thing you would pack, and one thing you would leave on the curb? Keep it light or let it go deep — this group will find its own level.

Further Reading — More from Ray Lopez. *Hard Knocks* (Book One of the trilogy) tells the New York story that made Ray — the streets, the lockups, and the first cry for help. *Hard Faith* (Book Three) carries the family home to the East Coast and into the federal probation career California prepared him for. For Ray's fiction, read *The Painter*, his novella based on true stories from his caseload years, and *The Second Coming of Joan*, his newest novel.

Invite Ray to Your Meeting

Ray loves book clubs — and he would love to meet yours. Invite him to join your discussion for a **free 15-minute Q&A by Zoom or FaceTime**: bring your hardest questions about the book, the boys of Los Pinos, or the road from Long Island to California and back.

To arrange a visit, reach out through the Contact page at

raylbooks.com

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