

Killers of the Flower Moon Discussion Questions

by David Grann

Author Bio: (from Penguin Random House & Wikipedia)

David Grann is a staff writer at The New Yorker Magazine and the bestselling author of *The Lost City of Z*, which has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. He is also the author of *The Devil* and *Sherlock Holmes*. His work has garnered several honors for outstanding journalism, including a George Polk Award.



Characters:

- **Mollie Burkhart** – A wealthy Osage woman whose family was targeted.
- **Ernest Burkhart** – Mollie’s white husband, the father of her three children, and her official financial guardian. Ernest’s uncle is William Hale.
- **Bryan Burkhart** – Ernest’s younger brother.
- **Margie Burkhart** – The granddaughter of Mollie and Ernest Burkhart; she shared her father’s memories of the “Reign of Terror” with Grann as well as stories about Mollie’s and Ernest’s lives in later years.
- **James Bighart** – The legendary chief of the Osage who negotiated the prescient treaty with the government to retain mineral rights for the tribe. George Bighart, James’s nephew who gave information to W.W. Vaughan.
- **Anna Brown** – Mollie’s oldest sister, a divorcee who spent a lot of time in the reservation’s rowdy boomtowns.
- **William Hale** – Ernest’s uncle, a self-made man of great wealth and staggering power; revered by many people as “King of the Osage Hills.”
- **J. Edgar Hoover** – The twenty-nine-year-old newly appointed director of the Bureau of Investigation; he saw the Osage cases as a way to redeem the bureau’s bad reputation and advance his own career.
- **Lizzie** – Mollie’s mother, deeply attached to Osage traditions even as the world around her changed; she suffered a slow, inexplicable death.
- **Scott Mathis** -- Owner of the Big Hill Trading Company and a close friend of both Mollie Burkhart and William Hale; he managed Lizzie’s and Anna’s financial affairs and administered Anna’s estate.
- **Barney McBride** – A white oilman who sought help for the Osage.
- **James and David Shoun** – Local doctors (and brothers).
- **Henry Roan** – Briefly married to Mollie when they were young; he borrowed heavily from William Hale and made Hale the beneficiary of his insurance policy.
- **Rita Smith** – Mollie’s sister. Married to Bill Smith.
- **Tom White** – An old-style frontier lawman and former Texas Ranger who was put in charge of the investigation.

- **John Wren** – Recruited by White, he was then one of the few American Indians (perhaps the only one) in the bureau.
- **W.W. Vaughan** – A lawyer who worked closely with private detectives trying to solve the Osage cases.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Killers of the Flower Moon combines the fast pace of a true-life murder mystery with the scope and detail of a narrative history. How does Grann integrate these different aspects of the book? Was it well done?
3. What do the contemporary media reports on the wealth and lifestyle of the Osage reflect about white perceptions of Native Americans? In what way do they lay a foundation for the way the murders and mysterious deaths were treated by law enforcement?
4. What does Grann's account of the relationship between the United States government and Native Americans contribute to your understanding of the country's history?
5. How did the government's policies in regards to Native Americans affect individuals like Mollie and her family?
6. Grann describes Lizzie's death by saying "Lizzie's spirit had been claimed by Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior, and by Wah'Kon-Tah, the Great Mystery." What does that tell you about how the Osage culture had been impacted by the dominant white culture?
7. What was your first impression of William Hale? How does Grann bring to life his strengths and appeal, as well as the darker side of his nature? What qualities does he share with people who achieve power and influence today?
8. How did you respond to the description of law enforcement in America during the 1920s? What elements most shocked or surprised you? What made the situation in Osage County particularly chaotic? What effect did this have on the investigations into the deaths of Anna Brown and Charles Whitehorn?
9. Discuss the circumstances that distinguished the Osage from other Native American tribes, including the actions taken by tribal leaders early in the century; the influx of white settlers and oil prospectors; the granting of headrights; and the guardianship system.
10. What is the significance of the murders of Barney McBride, the oilman who went to Washington to seek help for the Osage and of W.W. Vaughan, the attorney who worked with private detectives investigating the murders?
11. What does Grann's portrait convey about J. Edgar Hoover? What traits stand out and what do they foretell about Hoover's future as director of the FBI?
12. In what ways does Tom White combine the qualities of the Old West and of the modern bureaucratic system Hoover is trying to create? How does this influence the steps he takes in investigating the murders? How do the various views of White, including the stories of his childhood and his work as a Texas Ranger shape your impressions of him?

13. Who do you think was the hero of this book? Was it Tom White? Mollie Burkhart? Why did you pick that person?
14. How were manufactured evidence, suborned testimony, and false confessions used to divert the FBI investigation? What role did independently hired private eyes and informants play in the search for the truth?
15. The crimes in Osage County involved many levels of deception and betrayal. In addition to the actual conspirators, who else either directly profited from the crimes or was silently complicit in them? In what ways did accepted mores encourage the corruption that plagued the investigation?
16. In addition to introducing up-to-date forensic science, how did Hoover use the case to transform the Bureau of Investigation and simultaneously enhance his own image?
17. During Hale's trial, a member of the Osage tribe said, "It is a question in my mind whether this jury is considering a murder case or not. The question for them to decide is whether a white man killing an Osage is murder—or merely cruelty to animals.". Why does this observation resonate beyond the immediate circumstances?
18. Perhaps the most chilling aspect of Killers of the Flower Moon is the marital and familial connections between murderers and their victims. What explains Ernest Burkhart's actions even as he remained married to and had children with Mollie? How does Grann bring to life the particular horror of crimes committed within a family and a close-knit community?
19. What does the evidence Grann uncovered when he visited Osage County in 2012 reveal about the lasting legacy of the "Reign of Terror"?
20. We are familiar with many American crimes and criminals during the early twentieth century from movies, books, and television shows. Why do you think the story of the Osage murders hasn't received similar attention?
21. Are there recent examples of racial prejudice and injustice that parallel those described in Killers of the Flower Moon? What has changed about the approach taken by law enforcement? About the attitudes expressed by the white community in the face of racial or religious discrimination? In what ways have things remained the same?
22. Grann has written four other nonfiction books. Will you read any of them?

References:

- David Grann – <https://www.davidgrann.com/>
- Penguin Random House – <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/208562/killers-of-the-flower-moon-by-david-grann/9780307742483/readers-guide/>
- Wikipedia – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Grann

David Grann Books

Nonfiction

- The Old Man and the Gun: And Other Tales of True Crime (2018)
 - The White Darkness (2018)
 - Killers of the Flower Moon (2014)
 - The Devil and Sherlock Holmes (2010)
 - The Lost City Of Z (2009)
-

If you liked Killers of the Flower Moon, try...

- The Earth Is Weeping – Peter Cozzens
- Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee -- Dee Brown
- Bloodland: A Family Story of Oil, Greed and Murder on the Osage Reservation – Dennis McAuliffe, Jr.
- Thunder in the Mountains – Daniel J. Sharfstein,
- Enemies: A History of the FBI – Tim Weiner
- Sundown – John Joseph Matthews