October Selection

*Manson: The Life and Times of Charles Manson* by Jeff Guinn

The *New York Times* bestselling, authoritative account of the life of Charles Manson, filled with surprising new information and previously unpublished photographs: “A riveting, almost Dickensian narrative…four stars” (*People*).

More than forty years ago Charles Manson and his mostly female commune killed nine people, among them the pregnant actress Sharon Tate. It was the culmination of a criminal career that author Jeff Guinn traces back to Manson’s childhood. Guinn interviewed Manson’s sister and cousin, neither of whom had ever previously cooperated with an author. Childhood friends, cellmates, and even some members of the Manson family have provided new information about Manson’s life. Guinn has made discoveries about the night of the Tate murders, answering unresolved questions, such as why one person near the scene of the crime was spared.

*Manson* puts the killer in the context of the turbulent late sixties, an era of race riots and street protests when authority in all its forms was under siege. Guinn shows us how Manson created and refined his message to fit the times, persuading confused young women (and a few men) that he had the solutions to their problems. At the same time he used them to pursue his long-standing musical ambitions. His frustrated ambitions, combined with his bizarre race-war obsession, would have lethal consequences.

Guinn’s book is a “tour de force of a biography…*Manson* stands as a definitive work: important for students of criminology, human behavior, popular culture, music, psychopathology, and sociopathy…and compulsively readable” (*Ann Rule, The New York Times Book Review*).

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What was your reaction upon learning that your group would be reading a biography of Charles Manson? What does the name and legacy mean to you personally?

2. Did learning about Manson’s childhood and upbringing change your perspective about him at all? What factors during this time period likely influenced his world view and indicated what was ahead for him?

3. Manson’s formative years were spent in and out of various juvenile correctional facilities. Did the system fail him? Or was he already beyond help?

4. Is it possible that some people are born evil? What events throughout Manson’s life indicated that he was predestined for notoriety? Were than any pivot moments that may have led him down another path?

5. Manson is often perceived as a figure of the Sixties and the counterculture movement, but in what ways does he represent the post-Great Depression, post-World War II era of America?

6. How was the social landscape of 1960s California – Bay Area and Los Angeles, specifically – conducive and inviting to Manson’s personality?

7. Manson was a marginally talented singer/songwriter in a place and time that was crowded with them. What do you think it was about his own style and personality that got him close to so many other talented musicians and industry players?

8. Would you consider Manson a leader? Why or why not? If yes, what leadership traits does he exhibit? If not, what disqualifies him?

9. What traits did most, if not all, of Manson’s followers exhibit? What did Manson offer them?
10. Guinn surmises that the Tate-LaBianca murders were a desperation move for Manson, who believed he was losing his followers. Do you agree or disagree?

11. Manson received the death penalty for his crimes but the sentence was commuted because of changes to California’s legal system. Does his case present a good debate for the validity of the death penalty?

12. How would you characterize Manson’s followers at the time of their convictions? How about in the present day?

13. Manson recently popped up in the news again in a lengthy Rolling Stone profile. Why do you think there is still a fascination with him 45 years later?

14. Do you think we will see a similar figure to Manson again? What about our current socioeconomic and political climate could breed another Manson?