

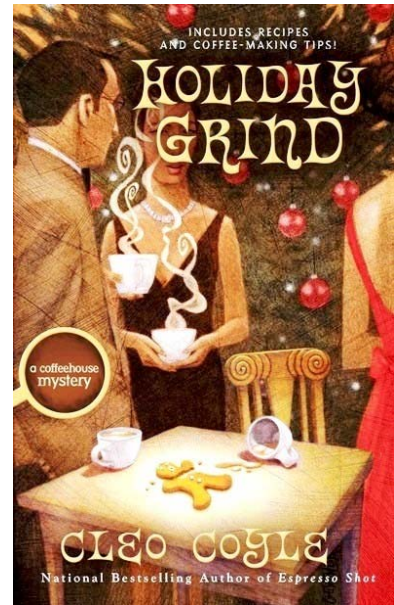
Reading Group Questions

Cleo Coyle's Coffeehouse Mystery #8

HOLIDAY GRIND

The following reading group questions were inspired by a set of questions originally composed by Jane Reed who has conducted past group discussions for previous Coffeehouse Mysteries at Java.net Books and Gifts, a coffeehouse and bookstore in Cuba, Missouri.

Many of these questions do not have “right” or “wrong” answers. This guide was designed to help lead a reading group through the events in the book’s narrative from beginning to end. Ideas are introduced to help spark discussion and encourage the sharing of thoughts and opinions. Feel free to skip any of these questions or add your own.



1. This Coffee House Mystery begins with a prologue in the point of view of a killer who is coldly stalking a victim. Who is this killer gunning for? What alibi is the killer planning to set up to avoid detection?
2. As a contrast to the book’s chilly opening, the reader finds the Village Blend staff members warm and dry in their cozy coffeehouse, brainstorming ideas for “taste of the season” lattes. The legendary gastronome Brillat-Savarin said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” Did the “taste of the season” choices by Clare and each of her baristas help tell you who they were?
3. What would your own “taste of the season” ideas be for Clare if you had joined her brainstorming session? Do any of these ideas come with a personal story of a family tradition? Remember what Clare also noted later in the book: Not all foodie memories are good foodie memories. Are there any tastes from holidays past that you would *not* want to eat or drink again?
4. Who is the murder victim and what is his connection to the Village Blend? Why does Clare like this man so much?
5. Cleo Coyle uses the state of the economy as a catalyst in her characters’ lives. How is the slow economy affecting Clare? In what ways did the meltdown of the financial sector in New York City drastically change the lives of our murder victim and his daughter?

6. One of the most challenging aspects for a writer of amateur sleuth mysteries is getting the amateur plausibly involved in a murder case. Motivation becomes the key here—not for the killer, but for the amateur sleuth. (In a police procedural or PI mystery, for example, solving crimes is already the main character’s profession.) How does Coyle get Clare Cosi involved in this particular case? What is her motivation? If it were you telling this story, could you have found another way to get Clare involved in the case?

7. Let’s discuss Clare’s nighttime investigation in the courtyard. She goes back to the original crime scene to search it. Why does Clare do this? What clue does she find? Was she smart or stupid here—or both? What does this sequence reveal about Clare Cosi? Is she a perfect person, a polished sleuth who never makes a mistake? Do you like this about her? Or dislike it? What does this sequence reveal about Clare’s relationship with her ex-husband, Matt Allegro?

8. Who is Sergeant Emmanuel Franco? Can you name some of his defining characteristics? What did you like or dislike about him? What did you think of how Clare handled Frano in the Sixth Precinct interview room? What did you think of how she handled the lawyer Chip Castle? What did this arrest sequence reveal about Clare Cosi?

9. Clare is in a relationship with Detective Mike Quinn. How does Mike react to Clare’s being arrested? Did this surprise you? What did it tell you about Mike Quinn? What do you like or dislike about Clare’s relationship with him? What is the OD Squad? What “cold case” is heating up for Mike in this book?

10. Who is James Young? Why does Clare think he has something to do with Alf’s murder? Where does it lead her?

11. Who is Madame Dreyfus Allegro Dubois? What are your thoughts about her as one of this series’ main characters? Can you name some of her defining traits? What does Madame figure out about her granddaughter Joy’s holiday plans? What does that tell you about Madame?

12. What did you think of the television taping that Clare attends with Madame? Did it remind you of any television shows you know of? What were your impressions of this particular show? What clue did Clare notice during the taping? Did you suspect anyone she meets with being involved in Alf’s murder?

13. Did you enjoy Clare’s trip to Staten Island? How did you like Esther as a sleuthing partner?

14. What is Omar Linford's connection to the murder victim? What is Shelly Glockner's connection? How did these two characters strike you when Clare meets with them? Did you believe one of them was involved with Alf's murder? What does Omar Linford's secretary give to Clare before she leaves the island? Why is that important to the plot?
15. Did the Staten Island ferry "event" surprise you? Why was this done to Clare? What was taken from her handbag on the ferry? Who did you think was responsible for what happened to Clare in that sequence?
16. Cleo Coyle sometimes introduces a "walk-on" character in a book who then takes a larger role in a succeeding mystery. According to the author, one of the characters in the Staten Island Ferry sequence will return in a future book, who do you think it is? Why do you think that character will return?
17. Who does Esther photograph with her cell phone camera? Where and when does she do this? Why does it give Clare an important clue to follow? Where does it lead Clare?
18. What second murder occurs that helps Clare put the pieces of the murder-mystery puzzle together?
19. Who is Shane Holliday? Why is he hanging around the Blend? What did you think of the *Ticket to the North Pole* party at the New York Public Library?
20. Mike Quinn gets some mysterious phone calls throughout the book. Did you have a theory on this before the truth was revealed?
21. What does Clare discover in her boyfriend's bedroom near the end of the book? What is her reaction? Why does Clare think that Mike wasn't playing square with her? Do you agree with Clare? Or is she being too hard on Mike?
22. How does the white kitten act as a catalyst in solving the crime? How does "the box" that Matt carries off end up being an important and quite unusual factor in the plot?
23. What vital piece of evidence does Clare ultimately uncover that helps her solve Alf's murder? Why does this piece of evidence also help resolve Mike's case?
24. What was your reaction to the book's climactic moment (the last event, right before the epilogue)? This climax resolves not only the main plotline but two other subplots in the book. Explain what three open plotlines are resolved in this single climax.

25. Were you surprised where Mike spent the night before the climax? What does this tell you about Mike Quinn? What other positive outcomes occur at the end of this murder mystery that help to keep the novel upbeat?
26. Who is Joy paired with at the Christmas party? Do you think Coyle will explore this possible pairing in a future plotline? How would Clare and especially *Matt* feel about that? (Remember the interrogation scene that takes place with Clare, Matt, and this character in an NYPD interview room?)
27. Let's discuss some larger themes of the book. What did you think of Brother Dom's philosophy on what happens to people when they lose their jobs, lifelong careers, even their marriages, friends, and families? (See page 208.) Who did this happen to in the book?
28. Clare's investigation in this book becomes more than a search for Alf's killer. What else is Clare searching for? Think about her interview with Shelly and then Brother Dom. Consider the events of Alf's life. What is Clare trying to answer besides who killed Alf?
29. Why do you think Clare Cosi can't stop herself from getting involved in solving murders? Yes, this is a murder mystery series, but what if it wasn't? What do you see in Clare's character that makes her want to do this? (The next two questions may help the group's exploration of this.)
30. On page 277 of the book's epilogue, Clare Cosi quotes a very specific section of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Why do you think Coyle has Clare do this? (The next question will help you with the answer...)
31. When you consider the Dickens' quotation on page 277 of the epilogue and then think back to the opening of the book, where Clare blurts something out at the Christmas party (bottom of page 17 and page 18), what do you think the author is trying to say about her main character, Clare Cosi, and the world in which she lives? Does this help you understand why Clare can't stop herself from getting involved in righting wrongs? Do you agree or disagree with this view?
32. Brother Dom was a religious man. Why do you think he chose to use Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to minister to people instead of the Bible? Do you think this echoes Clare's earlier, more lighthearted comments about trying to build bridges across the divides between people with different belief systems (see bottom of page 7)?
33. What does Clare Cosi's last line in the epilogue of the book mean to you (page 279)?

34. Finally, let's discuss the coffee and culinary themes. How did the author use cooking and food to reveal character, story, or theme? For some examples see pages 3-9; bottom of page 40; page 52; page 57; pages 61-64; pages 114-116; page 157; pages 165-166; page 193; page 273 & bottom of 278. Take a look at the special bonus section of this book. Do the contributions of recipes from Coyle's different fictional characters help further reveal or define who they are?

35. Did you like the coffee facts and information at the end of the book? Did you learn anything surprising from them? What recipes would you most like to taste?

FINAL NOTE: Cleo Coyle enjoys hearing from readers. She invites you to post on her "Coffee Talk" message board at www.CoffeehouseMystery.com or write to her at VillageBlend@aol.com.