

ESTATE BOOK CLUB GUIDE



J. Andrew Shelley's *Estate* guides its readers through life's most universally painful moment.

The passage of a parent, grandparent or an adult sibling is awful. Life altering. But there is more than the loss of human connection. First emotions surge, driven by good and bad memories. Then the apportioning of property, money, and possessions steps in to center stage. It's a bitter brew frothy with sentiment and a twist of financial mania. Whether they want to or not, family members are forced to drink deeply.

It is common for an heir to taste bitterness. They think their share of property too small or their portion of grief too large. Resentment simmers, but it can also boil over. To protect against the worst, generations have drafted thousands of pages of law to order the distribution of assets at the end-of-life. Dozens of legal documents have been defined. Financial organizations have fashioned procedures for every turn. States have evolved probate court systems to adjudicate. And every day clerks and judges add their personal flair. After centuries, the probate process has become a callous thing, both science and art.

We are used to novels exploring love, loss, and resentment. *Estate* is unusual, though. Rather than ignoring the complexities around death for the sake of telling a simple story, it embraces them. Rather than pulling down the curtain after a mournful funeral—and getting on with life—it explores the intricacies of death and braves the bizarre intergenerational processes around it in the modern world.

The *Estate* Book Club Guide offers tips and questions to better learn from the novel *Estate*. So that when our loved ones—or ourselves—inevitably sail toward the edge of the sea of life, we can

Say A Better Goodbye

PROLOGUE

The brief prologue begins with two brothers having a last supper together.

In what ways might this be a “last supper”?

The narrator’s brother, Jeff, receives a phone call.

Who is “Miss Sunshine”?

Is Jeff right to ignore the caller? Can we know?

In the second half of this brief section, the narrator speaks with his mother. The conversation suggests many things that the story will address in future pages.

Who is the narrator?

What are questions the reader might explore later?

DRIP

The narrator is driving and takes three successive phone calls from people representing different parts of his life.

How does the text signal that we are now in the present?

Do we know roughly how many years have passed since the prologue?

How is the narrator feeling?

How does the narrator react to each caller? Is it the same?

Arriving at the family’s destination, Tim receives another phone call and must break his promise.

What is the promise and to whom?

What is the “drip” he faces?

What documents does he need to manage the next issue with his Mother’s estate? Why?

DYING

The chapter, Dying, describes recent history with Timothy's mother Holly: a birthday and then Christmas, the last before she dies.

Do we know what Holly hopes to learn the next time they are together?

Do Janice and Tim's family think Holly has behaved "typically"? What behavior had Tim, Janice, and Violet expected? What behavior did they experience?

Holly calls Tim in February with sad news.

What does she tell him?

Does Timothy take her declaration seriously?

Tim speaks to his mom more often, but he doesn't visit.

Does Timothy truly believe that Holly is dying?

Should he have visited Holly?

As her child (or as executor), should he have taken more action? Should he have involved himself in her care or begun organizing the estate? Should he have worked to distribute her things then?

How do people respond to the prospect of death?

After Holly dies, Timothy yells at his brother, Matt.

Was Timothy justified in his anger at Matt? Or angry with himself?

Are family fights around a death common?

HALO

After the immediate death, there can be a period of calm. In this time, families may gather to memorialize the lost one. Most are on their best behavior. Some on their worst. The functional things—the death certificate, an initial cleaning, consulting an attorney, filing a will—get started.

What did Holly say to Timothy about how difficult cleaning up her estate would be? Was she correct? Was she intentionally misleading him?

What small thing(s) did Tim find around the home that came to symbolize Holly? What does it suggest about her... or how Timothy thinks about her?

Tim is interested in speaking with the estate attorney once he begins to understand what the job of executor entails. Only then does he have questions.

Who teaches the executor how to do their job?

What surprise news does Tim learn from the estate attorney? (Hint: His brother is not happy.)

After spending a week cleaning his Mom's home, Tim brings home a bag of treasures.

What surprises him about his family's reaction to these treasures?

The graveside memorial service seemingly goes well.

What are the messages behind his cousin's Civil War story?

What happens between the brothers Timothy and Ethan at the end of the service? Why?

FIRST STEPS

Timothy starts the executor's job. The estate attorney explains that he must rapidly locate and quantify all the assets of the estate to complete an initial accounting. Tim hunts for files, reads documents, calls institutions, accesses accounts, visits banks, and more. He establishes an estate account, deposits funds into it, and makes payments for the funeral from the estate account and others from his personal accounts. Soon he is submitting letters and paperwork to formally terminate Holly's accounts or at least transfer them to Holly's estate.

How do family members file/submit a will?

What does the probate court first do with Holly's will?

Why does Jeff's brother, Ethan, believe he has the most current will?

What documentation from the probate court does Tim need before he can formally begin working with his mother's accounts?

The challenge of working with financial institutions begins.

Why is life insurance particularly easy to manage? (Hint: Beneficiary account!)

Why might Holly's many bank accounts end up not-so-easy?

The question of *how to pay for what* may need the help of an attorney. Estates going through probate can typically pay for funeral expenses and any debt incurred by the deceased before death, but other expenses must be researched. The answers are not always obvious.

Who is most unhappy when Timothy personally pays for Holly's mortgage and home expenses?

Who does Tim send letters to on behalf of the estate? Why? Must he send others?

THE HOUSE

The 2nd chapter, Dying, had stepped back into the past to tell the story of Holly's last year of life. In this chapter, The House, the narrative catches up to the 1st chapter, Drip. From this moment forward, there is no time-switching in the primary narrative.

What problem mentioned in chapter one does Timothy tackle here? (Hint: Tim's real estate agent had called him about something that kept the inspection from happening.)

How does the fix transition to another problem that Timothy must next address?

What does the imagery of water suggest throughout the story?

Timothy feels "handcuffed by Mom's ghost."

How do ghosts haunt this chapter and the story?

How does the tick tock of the grandfather clock further dominate Timothy?

Is Timothy losing his mind? Or is his Mom's home truly haunted?

A component of submitting an initial accounting is valuing the home and the contents in the home. Timothy had been raised to believe that his Mom owned valuable collections that required appraising.

What does Tim start learning about the value of Holly's "antiques"? (Hint: It's not good news.)

What does the "lost Thanksgiving" say about the relationship between Holly and her children?

What makes the growing independence of adult children hard?

PRECIOUS THINGS

Precious Things is the longest and most varied chapter. No surprise that it straddles the middle of the story. The chapter begins with Timothy's exploration of the "precious things" Holly wanted given to her loved ones. He creates a matrix to show how her sentiments had changed over the years.

When Holly's son, Jeff, had asked for things that made sense for his new family in its new home, what had Holly told him? What happened when she was ready to part with things?

How does the online estate sale of Holly's precious things confirm Tim's growing fears about the value of the "antiques" Holly had invested a lifetime gathering?

What does Ethan do that surprises/doesn't surprise Timothy? (Hint: It happens when Ethan comes to pick up his final stuff from Holly's home.)

In the middle of the chapter we lose the "best" spirit in the story, Matt's partner Isaac.

What were the things Timothy had urged Matt and Isaac to do to prepare their estate? (Isaac had been married previously, had a child, and then divorced.)

Did you perceive that intergenerational deaths (of a partner with multiple children by different partners or of the last living partner in a marriage) are typically more difficult?

Timothy, who isn't always so bold, does a brave thing to help Matt. What is it? What is the result?

Towards the end of the chapter, Tim must rush to clean out Holly's house before it is sold.

How is Tim saved by his cousin? (Hint: Janice had urged him to do it.)

What is the 2nd secret we learn about the Watts family in the final cleanup?

What do we learn about Holly and her disappointments? (Hint: Buried among photos.)

Tim drives Holly's last few things to his home.

How does his journey relate to one of Holly's favorite children's stories?

Does Holly's ghost save Tim? (at least in Tim's mind)

Why is it that "today's generation" doesn't seem to appreciate the family treasures?

What is a "precious thing" for Holly? For Tim? For Violet? For you? What should be precious?

THE THIRD

Though sad, this chapter is welcome after the driving assault of the previous. It is simpler and primarily tells the stories of Janice, Timothy's partner, her family and their kids Jaden and Violet.

Gerald is obsessed with sports success, but he seems like a decent man. Is he?

What is Charlie, Janice's brother, like? Is he a good son, brother, and uncle?

Timothy's family says, "Death and bad luck come in threes." How does that saying particularly apply to this chapter?

Sadly, Gerald passes away. Janice and Timothy follow Geri's written guidance, walking through his will and files and home largely over the course of a single morning.

How does Gerald's letter differ from the many letters from Holly?

What is the difference in the metaphors used to describe Gerald's and Holly's homes?

How do you feel about the passage of Geri versus the passage of Holly?

What did Geri do to make his estate—similar to Holly's—so much easier to manage than Holly's? Was he smart, lucky, or merely thoughtful?

COUNTDOWN

The focus returns to Holly's estate. Timothy tackles work and the difficult relationship with his brother, Ethan. All while the calendar days pass. If Tim doesn't get the proceeds from the Machine Drivn shares deposited into the estate account in time, Holly's estate will remain open another year.

What mistake had Timothy made that forced this countdown? (See Precious Things.)

What mistake had Timothy made around the Suter watch?

What is Timothy trying to get from his brother, Ethan? (Hint: The probate court needs proof.)

What does it matter if the estate has to remain open through another calendar year, until the filing of the next year of taxes?

Probate court is exacting about the things it can measure. All while so much of the process around death is imprecise and squishy.

How does Timothy fail versus the countdown? Is it his fault?

Would he have failed had he been using Big American Bank? Is there a lot of arbitrariness in the estate process?

How does time play a significant role in the sounds and imagery used throughout the story?

FAMILY SPIRITS

By the end of the chapter, the technical process of closing Holly's estate will still tick on, but Timothy has survived the worst of the family spirits.

Has Timothy better connected with his children? With Janice?

Janice analyzes why Holly's estate was so much harder than Geri's and declares that Timothy had to pay for Holly's love. Unlike Geri, who appears to have given it more freely.

What did Janice mean? How was she right? How wrong? Can we really know?

Timothy travels to East Tennessee to collect the final puzzle pieces of the estate.

What things did Timothy encounter in Ethan's home that reminded him of the family he grew up with?

What do we learn about Ethan's unfortunate family?

How do you think Timothy approaches religion? God?

How does the ticking of the clock again empower the spirits of the past?

Timothy and Ethan go out to eat lunch.

Does this lunch remind us of other lunches, earlier in the story?

What is Timothy doing when he brings up the family's "last Christmas"? What do we learn?

Drama breaks out in the diner. There is far more action here than in the rest of *Estate*, but the action reminds us of the texts regarding the shooting outside of Nashville and the second Watts family secret.

How do the two brothers react to the violence? Who do they protect?

How do the brothers work together? And how does their collaboration draw upon the heroic story told about the brothers as young boys? (Hint: Football.)

How do the two brothers Tim sees in the diner contrast with Timothy and Ethan?

The Tim we meet at the start of *Estate* is deeply analytical and passive. Janice directly criticizes him for it. Action scenes can drag a character's interior to the surface.

When the violence stops, what do you think has happened to Ethan?

How does Timothy get past the rules and show his care for his brother?

How does Timothy get past the pressure of the job and the boss who controls his life? Was this a big moment for him and you, the reader?

Tim has one more morning discussion with Ethan.

How is he more assertive than in the past?

How does the family past call to him, trying to suck him back into old patterns and ways of thinking?

How does Timothy respond to Ethan's revelation? Is he yielding to the past or embracing a better future?

What do you think Timothy means in his final statement about blood and water?

POSTMORTEM

Timothy leaves a letter for Jaden and Violet to read around his death.

What has Timothy learned that has led to this “better” Goodbye?

How has he approached his passage differently than Holly approached hers?

How much of his approach centers on “better” relationships?

How much is about managing the functional things to do with possessions, accounts, deeds, legal things, and such?

Timothy’s letter is about loving but also doing.

How does Timothy’s letter make you feel?

Is there anything you should do now to “say a better goodbye” to your family?