



HARD ROW: Book Club Discussion Guide

Irrelevant factoid: This was the first time that birds appeared on one of my covers. These are supposed to be crows, although a Canadian reader thought they were ravens, not crows.

Margaret Maron on the writing of *Hard Row*: Several strands came together for me when I first began to plot *Hard Row*. Our local newspaper, *The News and Observer*, had carried many stories about immigration issues, living conditions for migrant farm workers, domestic violence, and yes, able-bodied drivers parking in handicap spaces; but one story in particular so resonated, I knew I would have to fictionalize and use it. The picture showed a migrant mother playing with her beautiful baby boy. Latino. Big brown eyes, a radiant smile, and a look of happy intelligence on that little face. No arms. No legs. The mother had been in the first crucial stage of pregnancy when she went into the tomato fields that day. She was told to keep working while the tomatoes were sprayed with a chemical insecticide. She came out of the field covered in green poison that the company claimed would not harm humans. Nine months later, her son was born armless and legless. The company denied responsibility. It was found negligent and a fairly large settlement imposed. After the headlines died down, the company appealed and the large settlement was reduced to something appallingly minimal. No amount of money could ever compensate, but money will be needed to make that life livable. Cheap food does not come cheaply.

A few readers have complained that this book is more violent and gory than any of my others. Anger will do that, I suppose.

DISCUSSION POINTS:

1. *Hard Row* draws on Margaret Maron's own background and observations about the way migrant labor is considered in today's global economy. At one point, Deborah comments that "To claim that they do the work Americans are unwilling to do ignores the unspoken corollary—'unwilling to do it for that kind of money.'" Without getting too much into the rights and wrongs of such heavy dependence on undocumented workers, how do you feel about that comment?
2. The owners of Harris Farms made a lot of money growing vegetables. What does their daughter mean when she says, "You think I don't know the real cost of growing a bushel of tomatoes?" Agri-businesses claim that competition forces them into certain practices. Would you be willing to pay a few cents more for your tomatoes or chickens if it meant better working conditions for laborers, or are the growers right?
3. As more and more migrants obtain green cards and eventual citizenship, there will be more and more relationships such as the one that Deputy Mayleen Richards has begun with Miguel Diaz. What sort of culture clashes are they apt to encounter? Do you think they have a happy ending in store?
4. Among the recurring cases that come before a district court judge, the most troubling are those that concern the well-being of children and the safety of women threatened with domestic violence. If you were a judge, how would you try to prevent the death of woman like Karen Braswell?
5. In addition to balancing a judicial career with a new husband and a large gregarious family, Deborah now finds herself a stepmother. What advice would you give her the next time Dwight's son Cal tells her that she's not his mother and he doesn't have to obey her?

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