

Oliver Wolcott Library
Defending Jacob By William Landay
Book Discussion Guide
Prepared by Caitlin Costa



About the book:

At home, Andy Barber is a quiet family man, a devoted husband and father. At work, he is a trusted senior prosecutor, the District Attorney’s right hand and master trial lawyer. When a teenaged boy is found dead in the woods near Barber’s suburban home, naturally he takes on the investigation, as he has countless homicides before. But the case may be Barber’s undoing: in an unexpected swerve, Barber’s own 14-year-old son, Jacob, is accused of the murder.

The boy insists he is innocent, and Barber rallies to his son’s defense — as any father would, he thinks, as any father *must*. But defending Jacob exacts a terrible price. Neighbors lock their doors against him. Jacob’s classmates refuse to talk. Barber’s marriage begins to crumble as his beloved wife Laurie buckles under the relentless pressure of suspicion. Finally, as Jacob’s trial intensifies, Barber faces a trial of his own, in which he is forced to confront his own secret history, a past he thought he’d buried long ago.

Source: williamlanday.com

About the Author:

William Landay is the author of the highly acclaimed **Mission Flats**, which was awarded the John Creasey Memorial Dagger as the best debut crime novel of 2003. A graduate of Yale University and Boston College Law School, he was an assistant district attorney before turning to writing. He lives in Boston, where he is at work on his next novel of suspense.

Source: Randomhouse.com

Reviews:

“Defending Jacob is a novel that comes to you out of the blue and manages to keep you reading feverishly until the whole thing is completed....a stunning novel...one that should draw attention to the possibilities it raises. In the next few weeks, Defending Jacob is the novel most readers are going to be discussing.” – *Huffington Post*

“There are two types of suspense that run through *Defending Jacob*, a courtroom drama that hinges on the murder of a high school boy. The first comes from trying to guess who killed him. The second comes from wondering whether this book’s author, William Landay, a former district attorney with two well-received novels behind him, has developed the chops to catapult himself into the Scott Turow tier of legal-eagle blockbuster writers. The jury stays out until this book’s very last words.... Ingenious.” – *Janet Maslin, New York Times*

“How far would you go to protect your child? That’s the provocative question at the heart of William Landay’s gripping new thriller, *Defending Jacob* ... Like John Grisham and Scott Turow, Landay is a lawyer with a solid grasp of how to use courtroom scenes to advance his jigsaw-puzzle story. ... With a grabby premise and careful plotting, he keeps you turning the pages through the shocking gut-punch of an ending.” – *Entertainment Weekly*

“Landay, a former DA, mixes gritty court reporting with Andy’s painful confrontation with himself, forcing readers willy-nilly to realize the end is never the end when, as Landay claims, the line between truth and justice has become so indistinct as to appear imaginary. This searing narrative proves the ancient Greek tragedians were right: the worst punishment is not death but living with what you — knowingly or unknowingly — have done.” – *Publishers Weekly (Starred review)*

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. How would you have handled this situation if you were Andy? Would you make the same choices he made? Where would you differ the most?
2. Before and during the trial, how would you have handled the situation if you were Laurie? Do you feel she made strong choices as a mother and a wife?
3. Is Andy a good father? Why or why not?
4. Do you believe Jacob is guilty?
5. Is Jacob a product of his upbringing? Do you think he is a violent person because his environment made him violent, or do you think he has had violent inclinations since birth?
6. How do you think people could or should stop adolescent bullying?
7. How much of a factor did Jacob’s age play into your sympathies for him or lack thereof? If Jacob were seventeen, would you view him differently? What about if he were nine?
8. Do you think Neal Logiudice acts ethically in this novel? What about Andy?
9. What is the most damning piece of evidence against Jacob? Is there anything that you felt exonerated him?
10. If Jacob hadn’t been accused, how do you think his life would have turned out? What kind of a man do you think he would grow up to be?

Further Reading:

The Good Father by Noah Hawley

As a rheumatologist, Dr. Paul Allen's specialty is diagnosing patients other doctors have given up on. His son, Daniel Allen has always been a good kid but, as a child of divorce, he is also something of a drifter. Which may be why, at the age of nineteen, he quietly drops out of Vassar and begins an aimless journey across the United States, shedding his former skin and eventually even changing his name. One night, Paul is home with his family when a televised news report announces that the Democratic candidate for president has been shot, and Daniel is the lead suspect. Convinced of his son's innocence Paul begins to trace his sons steps to see where Daniel, or perhaps Paul, went wrong, beginning a harrowing journey--about the responsibilities of being a parent and the capacity for unconditional love in the face of an unthinkable situation—that keeps one guessing until the very end.

House Rules by Jodi Picoult

Jacob Hunt is a teenage boy with Asperger's syndrome. He's hopeless at reading social cues or expressing himself well to others, and like many kids with AS, Jacob has a special focus on one subject—in his case, forensic analysis. He's always showing up at crime scenes, thanks to the police scanner he keeps in his room, and telling the cops what they need to do...and he's usually right. But then his town is rocked by a terrible murder and, for a change, the police come to Jacob with questions. All of the hallmark behaviours of Asperger's—not looking someone in the eye, stimulatory tics and twitches, flat affect— can look a lot like guilt to law enforcement personnel.

Suddenly, Jacob and his family, who only want to fit in, feel the spotlight shining directly on them. For his mother, Emma, it's a brutal reminder of the intolerance and misunderstanding that always threaten her family. For his brother, Theo, it's another indication of why nothing is normal because of Jacob. The soul-searing question looms: Did Jacob commit murder?

We Need to Talk About Kevin by Lionel Shriver

Eva never really wanted to be a mother - and certainly not the mother of the unlovable boy who murdered seven of his fellow high school students, a cafeteria worker, and a much-adored teacher who tried to befriend him, all two days before his sixteenth birthday. Now, two years later, it is time for her to come to terms with marriage, career, family, parenthood, and Kevin's horrific rampage in a series of startlingly direct correspondences with her estranged husband, Franklin. Uneasy with the sacrifices and social demotion of motherhood from the start, Eva fears that her alarming dislike for her own son may be responsible for driving him so nihilistically off the rails.

Afterwards: A Novel by Rosamund Lupton

When her children's school is set ablaze, Grace runs into the burning building to rescue her teenage daughter, Jenny. In the aftermath, badly injured, Grace learns the police have identified the arsonist, but they have blamed the wrong person. Only Detective Sarah McBride, the sister-in-law Grace has never

liked, is searching for the real arsonist--a hunt that becomes urgent when it's clear Jenny is still the perpetrator's target.

Far From the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity by Andrew Solomon

In *Far from the Tree*, Andrew Solomon tells the stories of parents who not only learn to deal with their exceptional children but also find profound meaning in doing so. A startling proposition is that diversity is what unites us all. He writes about families coping with deafness, dwarfism, Down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, multiple severe disabilities, with children who are prodigies, who are conceived in rape, who become criminals, who are transgender. While each of these characteristics is potentially isolating, the experience of difference within families is universal, as are the triumphs of love Solomon documents in every chapter.

The Constant Gardener: A Novel by John Le Carre

The novel opens in northern Kenya with the gruesome murder of Tessa Quayle—young, beautiful, and dearly beloved wife to Justin. When Justin sets out on a personal odyssey to uncover the mystery of her death, what he finds could make him not only a suspect among his own colleagues, but a target for Tessa's killers as well.

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter by Tom Franklin

In the 1970s, Larry Ott and Silas "32" Jones were boyhood pals in a small town in rural Mississippi. Their worlds were as different as night and day: Larry was the child of lower-middle-class white parents, and Silas, the son of a poor, black single mother. Their worlds were as different as night and day, yet, for a few months, the boys stepped outside of their circumstance and shared a special bond. Then Larry took a girl to a drive-in movie and she was never seen or heard from again. . She was never found and there was no confession, but all eyes rested on Larry. The incident shook the county—and perhaps Silas most of all. His friendship to Larry was broken, distraught Silas decides to leave town.

More than twenty years have passed. Larry lives a solitary, shunned existence, never able to rise above the whispers of suspicion. Silas has returned to town as a constable. He and Larry have no reason to cross paths until another girl disappears and Larry is blamed, again. And now, two men who once called each other friend are forced to confront the past they've buried and ignored for decades.