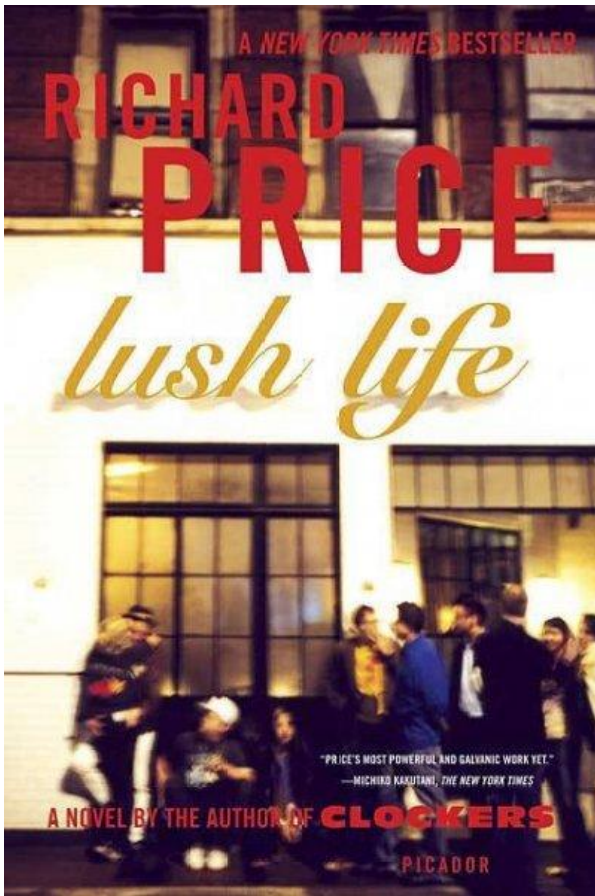


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



Master of the Bronx and Jersey projects, Price (*Clockers*) turns his unrelenting eye on Manhattan's Lower East Side in this manic crescendo of a novel that explores the repercussions of a seemingly random shooting. When bartender Ike Marcus is shot to death after barhopping with friends, NYPD Det. Matty Clark and his team first focus on restaurant manager and struggling writer Eric Cash, who claims the group was accosted by would-be muggers, despite eyewitnesses saying otherwise. As Matty grills Eric on the still-hazy details of the shooting, Price steps back and follows the lives of the alleged shooters—teenagers Tristan Acevedo and Little Dap Williams, who live in a nearby housing project—as well as Ike's grieving father, Billy, who hounds the police even as leads dwindle. As the intersecting narratives hurtle toward a climax that's both expected and shocking, Price peels back the layers of his characters and the neighborhood until all is laid bare.

About the Author



A self-described "middle class Jewish kid", Price grew up in a housing project in the northeast Bronx, and lives in New York City with his family. Price graduated from the Bronx High School of Science in 1967, and obtained a BA from Cornell University and an MFA from Columbia. He also did graduate work at Stanford. He has taught writing at Columbia, Yale, and New York University. He was one of the first people interviewed on the NPR show *Fresh Air* when it went national in 1987. In 1999, he received the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature.

Price's novels explore late 20th century urban America in a gritty, realistic manner that has brought him considerable literary acclaim. Several of his novels are set in a fictional northern New Jersey city called Dempsy. In his review of *Lush Life* (2008), Walter Kirn compared Price to Raymond Chandler and Saul Bellow.

The first of Price's eight novels is *The Wanderers* (1974), a coming-of-age story set in the Bronx in 1962, written when Price was 24 years old. *Clockers* (1992) was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. It has been praised for its humor, suspense, dialogue and characterizations. In 1995, it was made into a movie directed by Spike Lee; they share writing credits for the screenplay.

He has written numerous screenplays, of which the best known are *The Color of Money* (1986) for which he was nominated for an Oscar, *Life Lessons* (1989), *Sea of Love* (1989), *Mad Dog and Glory* (1992), *Ransom* (1996), *Shaft* (2000). He also wrote for the HBO series *The Wire*. Price was nominated for the Writers Guild of America Award award for Best Dramatic Series at the February 2009 ceremony for his work on the fifth season of *The Wire*. He is often cast in a cameo role in the films he writes. He also wrote and conceptualized the 15 minute film surrounding Michael Jackson's "Bad" video.

Price has published articles in the *The New York Times*, *Esquire Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, and other publications.

Awards

Lush Life was a *New York Times* Notable Book and was *Booklist* Editors' Choice for Best Fiction (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistsawards/booklistsbook>), both in 2008.

Reviews

Booklist *Starred Review*

Price (*Samaritan*, 2003) is a respected writer, but if he hasn't won the literary acclaim he deserves, perhaps it's because he focuses so often on crime. Although his plots make him worthy of the most discriminating crime-fiction fanship, as a writer of acute social conscience, he uses misdeeds as a lens through which to view the way people navigate ethical terrain in the precarious urban landscape. In outline, *Lush Life* is deceptively simple. On New York's gentrifying Lower East Side, two boys from the projects hold up three men, killing one. Two cops investigate. But Price's investigation is no mere police procedural, scouring away layers of self-defense in all of his vividly drawn characters. Such is his talent that we care about them all equally, whether they are the cops whose interrogation reduces an innocent man to emotional wreckage; the kid whose abuse leaves him unable to comprehend the value of human life; the narcissistic artists whose self-absorption renders them blind to the true desperation surrounding them. Stitching it together is the route driven by the Quality of Life Task Force, an undercover team that threatens pot smokers with hard time if they fail to produce a handgun. Given the plummeting crime rate in most major cities, it might be argued that crime-driven social dramas are no longer relevant. But making the streets safe for the café crowd has its hidden cost—and no one shows that better than Price.

Publishers Weekly * Starred Review *

Master of the Bronx and Jersey projects, Price (*Clockers*) turns his unrelenting eye on Manhattan's Lower East Side in this manic crescendo of a novel that explores the repercussions of a seemingly random shooting. When bartender Ike Marcus is shot to death after barhopping with friends, NYPD Det. Matty Clark and his team first focus on restaurant manager and struggling writer Eric Cash, who claims the group was accosted by would-be muggers, despite eyewitnesses saying otherwise. As Matty grills Eric on the still-hazy details of the shooting, Price steps back and follows the lives of the alleged shooters—teenagers Tristan Acevedo and Little Dap Williams, who live in a nearby housing project—as well as Ike's grieving father, Billy, who hounds the police even as leads dwindle. As the intersecting narratives hurtle toward a climax that's both expected and shocking, Price peels back the layers of his characters and the neighborhood until all is laid bare. With its perfect dialogue and attention to the smallest detail, Price's latest reminds readers why he's one of the masters of American urban crime fiction. Author tour.

Library Journal * Starred Review *

Price (*Samaritan*) is an exceptionally accomplished storyteller whose ear for the accents of New York is the equal of the late, lamented George V. Higgins's love for Boston speech. And though what Price narrates often disturbs, it is just as often funny. A hood advises a young accomplice how to use a gun for the first time: "You just do it to get it done with, then you can start concentratin' on getting better at it, havin' fun with it." The novel starts with a killing, the consequence of a late-night robbery. The killing is almost accidental; an eyewitness exclaims, "It was like God snapped his fingers." Eric, a 35-year-old failed actor and writer, is paralyzed by guilt over his failure to stop the murder. The police, who find him highly suspicious, arrest him, and everything goes downhill from there. When the shooter is finally caught, he is a pathetic man-boy from the projects. Price's New York is a city that no longer works: too many people are left bruised, with no safety net. Strongly recommended for fiction collections.

Literary Criticism

A Master at Work

It's pretty seldom that, only a few pages into a novel, you know you're in the hands of a writer who does what he does as well as anyone else alive. *Lush Life* is that sort of book: entirely imagined, dense with life, and written sentence by sentence without a false note or a moment of drag.

In the opening chapter we are introduced to the 'Quality of Life Task Force'--a team of four undercover cops 'in a bogus taxi set up on the corner of Clinton Street alongside the Williamsburg Bridge off-ramp to profile the incoming salmon run'. As the figure of speech suggests, they're fishing--random car-stops, hoping to pull guns, dope, knives. They are, not that we're to know it yet, bit-part players; but they give Price the opportunity to establish his scene and his scope.

The description of how they patrol, in a single long paragraph, at once recalls and dispatches the sort of poetic, consciously virtuosic coast-to-coast panning shot that

opens Rick Moody's *The Diviners*. This is about the local. And this is--like the Lower East Side of Manhattan and like proper police work--a bare accumulation of facts on the ground:

Restless, they finally pull out to honeycomb the narrow streets for an hour of endless tight right turns: falafel joint, jazz joint, gyro joint, corner. Schoolyard, creperie, realtor, corner. Tenement, tenement, tenement museum, corner. Pink Pony, Blind Tiger, muffin boutique, corner. Sex shop, tea shop, synagogue, corner. Boulangerie, bar, hat boutique, corner. Iglesia, gelateria, matzo shop, corner. Bollywood, Buddha, botanica, corner. Leather outlet, leather outlet, leather outlet, corner. Bar, school, bar, school, People's Park, corner. Tyson mural, Celia Cruz mural, Lady Di mural, corner. Bling shop, barbershop, car service, corner. And then finally, on a sooty stretch of Eldridge, something with potential: a weary-faced Fujianese in a thin Members Only windbreaker, cigarette hanging, plastic bags dangling from crooked fingers like full waterbuckets, trudging up the dark, narrow street followed by a limping black kid half a block behind.

That's as craftily and audaciously stylised, both sonically and in terms of its juxtapositions, as a jazz poem--but for anyone with even a glancing acquaintance with those streets, it also evokes the thing. It tells you exactly where you are.

On the face of it, Richard Price has written a straightforward Lower-Manhattan police procedural. There are eight million stories, as the man said, in the naked city, and this is one of them. Eric Cash, a writer in his mid-thirties still managing a diner while he waits for his life to begin, goes drinking with the new bartender, Ike Marcus, and a friend of Ike's. In the small hours of the morning, the three men are braced by a pair of muggers. Eric hands over his wallet. The other man passes out. Ike, young and brave and dumb, says: 'Not tonight, my man', and is shot dead for his pains.

It falls to Detective Matty Clark and his empathetic but tough-as-nails Latina partner Yolanda to work the case. The story doesn't unfold through a treasure-hunt of ingeniously unfolded clues, but through cock-ups, red herrings, grunt-work and dumb luck. The denouement is more or less an accident. And then there's the next thing. But this isn't a whodunit so much as a how-does-it-unfold?

Price is a writer of quite extraordinary gifts, using a police story as a probe into his real subject: the ecosystem of the city. The skeleton of this novel, as the genre demands, is its snappy dialogue--but around that, Price has built a world. Into this story, all New York flows.

If the Lower East Side is as I suggested, an ecosystem, it's a grimy sort of coral reef, populated by all sorts of peculiar fish. Eric's incarceration, for instance, gives Price the occasion for one of his almost Dickensian cameos:

The only ones in the cell who didn't seem to know anybody else or join in this periodic rush to the bars were Eric and a blaze-eyed black man, slack-bellied and nuts, wearing his T-shirt around his neck like a dickey as he disjointedly paced the perimeter whispering to himself.

Price is a writer of glorious surfaces, rich information, extravagant detail. He enters the thoughts of three characters--Tristan, the accidental killer; Eric, the nearly-victim; and Matty, the cop--but what they say and do remains much more important, as far as the narrative goes, than what they think or feel.

That is not to say that Price isn't interested in his characters' inner lives; only that they are most effectively manifest in their actions. He is especially attuned to the way power infuses relationships: the power struggle between a parent and a teenage child; a tough guy and a wannabe; the choreographed power-exchanges of a police interrogation. The crime that gets this story going makes Tristan, for a while, a bigger man; it makes Eric, whose psychological journey is among the finest things here, a little smaller.

Price is piercingly persuasive, too, on the way characters react to stress--to unexpectedly timed eruptions of grief or rage; or, more subtly, to the little irrationalities and outbreaks of distracted vagueness that afflict the afflicted. A study in this is the victim's father, who moves, entirely plausible, through the story like a zombie.

Price's New York lives above all in the spring and swing of its spoken language, or languages; Yiddishisms, NuYorican slang; black patois, copspeak. He really does the police in different voices. *Lush Life's* pages are raisin-studded with unexpected lexemes. A 'stew bum' is likely to be found 'zotzed' amid the 'last-call stagger-zoo' outside a bar; perps 'book' in one direction or another after 'juxing' the vic; the dead are 'pronounced' when they arrive at the hospital. 'Wits' can put you in the house if they talk to 'a police'. Children are 'hamsters'. Money is 'kale' or 'cheese' or 'cheddar'. 'Stank' is a noun. A bachelor's awkwardly shaped apartment is a 'three-room dumbbell'; a tenement stuffed to the rafters with illegal Chinese immigrants is 'a boat-building'. A healthy sex life means 'bookoo dugout'.

To list these in isolation is to ignore the verve and metrical bounce with which Price's characters combine them: Tristan at one point watches his ex-stepfather storm out of the room, for example, 'his equally bug-eyed mopstick skeeve of a wife bringing up the rear'.

And not everybody--a source of dry drollery--even understands each other. When Quality of Life pull someone over, they bust them for a little dope, and then pressure them (using a little fish to catch a bigger) to make some calls and see if they can find a gun. The kid says he doesn't know where to get a gun. One of the cops, Lugo, presses him.

'Huh ... so like, there's no one you could call, say, "Yo, I just got jacked in the PJs. I need me a onetime whistle, can I meet you at such and such?"' 'A whistle?' Lugo makes a finger gun. 'You mean a hammer?' 'A hammer, a whistle ...' Lugo turns away and tightens his ponytail. 'Pfff ...' The kid looks off, then, 'I know a knife.' Lugo laughs. 'My mother has a knife.'

Just look how well-timed that exchange is, among other things. But misunderstanding is all over the place. A cop asks a witness: 'The guy who throws the shot.' (That's a question, though with Price's usual exactness, neither spoken nor punctuated as such.)

The witness says: 'What?' and another cop glosses: 'Shoots.' One little gangsta promises another little gangsta he'll be 'my dolgier out there'. Later, sheepishly, he asks: 'What the f*** is a dolgier?' Most knowingly comical is the exchange when a drug dealer is caught by the police:

'Holy cow there, Dap,' Lugo said, pulling a fat wad of cash from one of Big Dap's knee-high basketball socks. 'What's the what on this?' 'I got to buy a crib,' Big Dap murmured, looking off. 'An apartment?' 'Naw, a crib. For the baby.'

So, is this the real New York? Not quite. It's an invented New York every bit as populous. Price's ear for dialogue isn't a reporter's so much as a screenwriter's. Too many characters here speak too well, too energetically, too dramatically; what they see from the corners of their eyes is too seldom exactly humdrum. This is that inflated, life-plus-50-per-cent version of realism that at once captures its original and builds on it. There is a difference between galvanic vigour and real, breathing life. You cannot help but suspect that Price can turn this stuff out by the yard; that his ambition in this book is not, perhaps, equal to his powers.

But it's none of my business to chide him for not writing a different book than the one he has. If anyone else thinks they can write a police procedural this good--this linguistically alive and this tough and this lushly inventive--let them by all means have a go.

Source: Leith, Sam. "A Master at Work." Spectator 307.9389 (9 Aug. 2008): 29. Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 285. Detroit: Gale, 2010. Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions *Source: http://www.litlovers.com/guide_lush_life.html*

1. How sympathetic a character is Eric Cash? How would you describe him? Why does he dislike Ike?
2. Once exonerated, why does Cash refuse to help Matty Clark identify the killers? Given his treatment at the hands of the police, is his refusal justified, self-indulgent, cowardly, self-pitying... or what?
3. Talk about the community itself. The book opens with Cash feeling a sense of connectedness to the previous denizens, the Jewish immigrants who settled the neighborhood at the turn of the 20th century and then moved on. There are also under-ground cellars which contain relics of previous lives. Talk about the kind people who populate the neighborhood now— the Bohemer's, the project kids, the drug dealers, and the police. Is there even a "community" or simply disconnected people who walk the same sidewalks?
4. Cash says he feels like everyone he knows on the lower East side "went to the same...art camp or something." What does he mean?
5. What about the memorial service Steven Boulware puts on? Is it an appropriate

mourning, a brilliant celebration of Ike's life...or self-dramatization of the part of the participants? How did it affect Ike's family?

6. Talk about Billy, Ike's father. Do you find him sympathetic or irritating or a brave survivor? And what's going on between Matty Clark and Billy's wife?

7. How do you feel about Matty Clark. Is he the book's hero? What about his two sons?

8. Do you find the ending satisfying? Is anything resolved? Should it be?

Multimedia

For Crime Novelist Richard Price, Life is 'Lush' (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101238934>

The author's appearance to discuss his novel on NPR's *Fresh Air*.

Lush Life Tour with Richard Price (Video Clip)

<http://vimeo.com/13128660>

Created to accompany *LUSH LIFE*, an exhibition which takes place at nine Lower East Side (LES) galleries. *LUSH LIFE* adopts Richard Price's 2008 novel to title and organize the exhibition. The novel is set in the contemporary LES and through a murder investigation exposes the dynamically changing community of the neighborhood, which despite its evolution retains a ghostly and vital link to its layered past.

Further Reading

Clockers by Richard Price

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1054817>

(Call number: Fiction Price)

At once an intense mystery and a revealing study of two men, a veteran homicide detective and an inner-city crack dealer, on opposite sides of an endless war.

The Wanderers: A Novel by Richard Price

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1054946>

(Call number: Fiction Price)

A teenage gang comes of age in the 1960s Bronx.

Samaritan by Richard Price

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1196857>

(Call number: Fiction Price)

After a lucrative television writing career comes to an abrupt end, ex-high school teacher Ray Mitchell returns to the New Jersey city of his birth--to rethink his life, reconnect with his teenage daughter and to spread the wealth on the housing project that reared him. He begins teaching again, embarks on an affair with a married woman from the old neighborhood and becomes a mentor to a former student recently released from jail. Then, disaster: he is found beaten nearly to death in his own apartment. He knows who did it, but he's not talking, and he refuses to press charges. It is up to

Detective Nerese Ammons--a childhood acquaintance from the projects--to get Ray to tell her what happened.

Author's official website

<http://www.hydrohotel.net/>

News, information, and resources from the author.

Read-Alikes Source: http://www.litlovers.com/guide_lush_life.html and *NoveList*

At City's Edge by Marcus Sakey

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1298491>

(Call number: Fiction Sakey)

Jason Palmer loved being a soldier. But after returning home from Iraq with an "other than honorable" discharge, he's finding rebuilding his life the toughest battle yet. Elena Cruz is a talented cop, the first woman to make Chicago's prestigious Gang Intelligence Unit. She's ready for anything the job can throw at her. Until Jason's brother, a prominent community activist, is murdered in front of his own son.

The Night Gardener by George Pelecanos

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1271166>

(Call number: Fiction Pelecanos)

All they knew, back in the winter of 1985, was that someone was taking teenagers, killing them and leaving their abused bodies in public parks. Three victims in all, with no link between them except a oddity of their names. They read the same back-to-front - Otto, Ava and lastly Eve. A lot has happened in the twenty years since. Detectives Gus Ramone and Dan Holiday - two of the leads on the case - have pursued very different paths. Gus has climbed to the heights of Detective Sergeant and built himself a reputation as a very good cop, whilst Dan has been drummed out of the force - his sleaze finally getting to his superiors.

Famine by Todd Komarnicki

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1131985>

(Call number: Fiction Komarnicki)

The corpse of a young man is found in one of Manhattan's most exclusive neighborhoods in the trendy East Village. Though his death appears to be self-willed, a police detective nevertheless decides the man was murdered and launches a maverick investigation. As the detective plunges into the mysterious case, his own past begins to intertwine with the history of the victim. Identities blur, names change, and at every step an unidentifiable woman and her infant daughter lurk in the shadows, not just watching, but somehow pulling the detective deeper into the mystery.

Extra!

Go around the group and have each member describe their own encounter with crime. Be dramatic and exciting while telling your story.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

