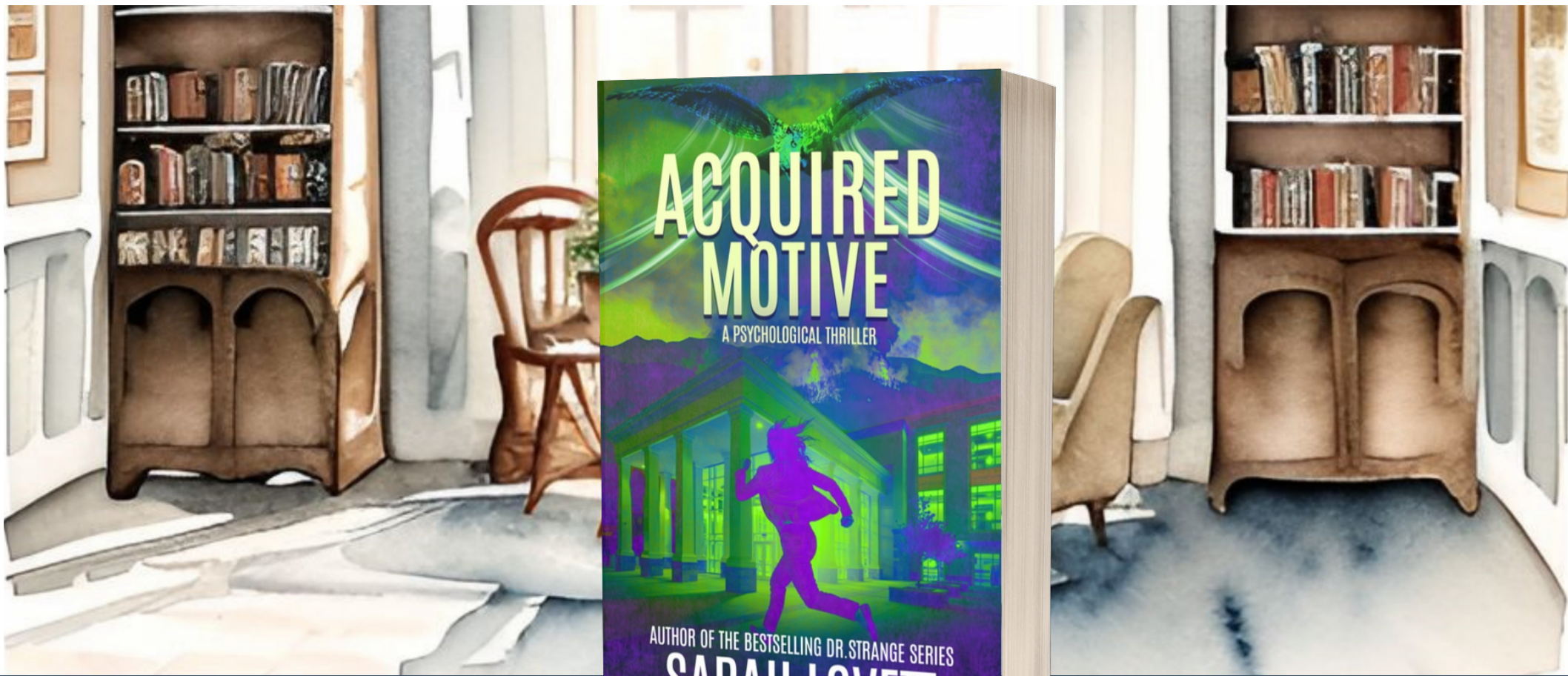




BOOK CLUB RESOURCE GUIDE

Psychological
Thriller



THANK YOU FOR
CONSIDERING ACQUIRED
MOTIVE FOR YOUR NEXT
BOOK CLUB READ

BOOK CLUB
RESOURCE GUIDE

Sarah Lovett

Dr. Sylvia Strange knows how to stay impartial. It's the job — testify to the facts, not the feelings, whether she's hired by the defense, the prosecution, or the court itself. But impartial testimony just helped a self-confessed predator walk free, and the accusation that follows her out of the courtroom — *you let him go* — doesn't fade the way professional distance is supposed to let it. As Sylvia gets closer to understanding how her newest subject operates, her own life is quietly coming apart — a betrayal she didn't see coming, a secret she's keeping from everyone who loves her, and a growing certainty that some people don't have a breaking point you can find. *Acquired Motive* is a smart, atmospheric psychological thriller about the cost of staying neutral in a world that keeps demanding a side.

WORD COUNT: 58,600

PAGE COUNT: 300

KEY WORDS: Forensic psychology | Psychological thriller | Santa Fe suspense, Moral ambiguity

DEMOGRAPHICS: Readers who love character-driven psychological thrillers built around a strong, morally complicated female investigator

COMP BOOKS: When the Bough Breaks by Jonathan Kellerman | In the Woods by Tana French | Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn

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Setting the mood

- Amber and red lighting
- few real or battery luminaries (paper bags with sand and a candle) lining the table or entryway,
- If you can manage it, a faint hint of woodsmoke (a lit candle or incense in a smoky scent) sets the atmosphere without overdoing it.

Music

- Play Spotify Playlist

Clothing suggestions

- Desert-noir chic
- muted earth tones,
- a blazer or structured jacket (nod to courtroom attire)
- Keep it more "small-town courthouse" than costume party.

Fun, easy props

- A gavel or notepad as a centerpiece
- Stack of manila folders labeled with fake case numbers for atmosphere
- Small dish of matches or a single lit candle on the table
- Sunglasses set out for guests to grab for photos.

THEMED ACTIVITIES – Smoke on the Mountain, Secrets in the Room

Fun Games

Impartial Witness

Read the group a short, ambiguous scenario (a workplace dispute, a family disagreement) and have each guest deliver a "neutral" verdict out loud, then vote on who stayed most convincingly impartial.

Who's Hiding What?

Each guest writes down one small, harmless secret (not a real confession — a fun one, like a guilty pleasure) on a card; the host reads them aloud and the group guesses whose is whose.

Courtroom Trivia

A quick round of true/false or multiple-choice questions about forensic psychology, the New Mexico setting, or plot details from the book (great for a re-read group).

THEMED ACTIVITIES – Smoke on the Mountain, Secrets in the Room

New Mexico Green Chile Stew *Serves 6–8*

- 2 lbs pork shoulder, cubed
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 onion, diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 2 cups roasted, peeled, and chopped New Mexico green chiles (or two 7-oz cans diced green chiles)
- 3 medium potatoes, cubed
- 1 tsp cumin
- 1 tsp oregano
- Salt and pepper to taste

Heat oil in a large pot over medium-high heat and brown the pork in batches. Remove and set aside. Sauté the onion and garlic in the same pot until softened. Return the pork to the pot, add broth, green chiles, cumin, and oregano. Simmer, covered, for about 1 hour, then add the potatoes and simmer another 30–40 minutes until the pork is tender and potatoes are cooked through. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

THEMED MENU - The Forensic Feast

Blue Corn Enchiladas

Serves 6

- 12 blue corn tortillas
- 3 cups shredded rotisserie chicken (or black beans for a vegetarian option)
- 2 cups red or green chile enchilada sauce
- 2 cups shredded Monterey Jack cheese
- 1/2 cup diced onion

Preheat oven to 375°F. Warm the tortillas briefly to make them pliable. Fill each with chicken (or beans), roll, and arrange seam-side down in a baking dish. Pour enchilada sauce evenly over the top, sprinkle with cheese and onion, and bake for 20–25 minutes until bubbling.

Sopapillas with Honey

Makes about 16

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 1/2 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 tbsp shortening
- 3/4 cup warm water
- Vegetable oil, for frying
- Honey, for serving

Whisk together flour, baking powder, and salt. Cut in shortening until crumbly, then gradually add warm water, mixing until a soft dough forms. Knead briefly, roll out to about 1/4-inch thickness, and cut into 3-inch squares or triangles. Fry in 375°F oil until puffed and golden, about 1–2 minutes per side. Drain on paper towels and serve warm, drizzled with honey.

THEMED MENU - The Forensic Feast



A smoky, high-desert riff on a classic margarita.

Ingredients:

- 2 oz reposado tequila
- 1/2 oz mezcal (for the smoke)
- 3/4 oz fresh lime juice
- 1/2 oz agave syrup
- 1 thin slice fresh jalapeño (muddled or as garnish, to taste)
- Tajín or chile-salt rim
- Lime wheel, for garnish

Instructions:

Rim a rocks glass with chile-salt or Tajín. If using muddled jalapeño, muddle it gently in the bottom of a shaker first. Add tequila, mezcal, lime juice, and agave syrup with ice. Shake well and strain over fresh ice into the prepared glass. Garnish with a lime wheel and a fresh jalapeño slice. Serve to whoever the group has decided is staying "most impartial" that night.

SIGNATURE DRINK - The Acquired Motive

Wicked Game — Chris Isaak
Ride — Lana Del Rey
Criminal — Fiona Apple
Glory Box — Portishead
Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This) — Eurythmics
Ring of Fire — Johnny Cash
Space Cowboy — Steve Miller Band
House of the Rising Sun — The Animals
Crazy — Patsy Cline
No Surprises — Radiohead
Hurt — Johnny Cash
Angel of the Morning — Juice Newton
The Chain — Fleetwood Mac
Dark Horse — Katy Perry
Little Wing — Jimi Hendrix



SPOTIFY MUSIC RECOMMENDATIONS

A soft, watercolor-style illustration of a living room. On the left is a tall wooden bookshelf filled with books. In the center background is a fireplace with a mantel. To the right is another wooden bookshelf, also filled with books. In the foreground, there is a light-colored, plush sofa. The overall atmosphere is warm and inviting.

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS POSSIBLE
SPOILERS FOR THIS BOOK IN
THE DISCUSSION SECTION.

WARNING

- Early in the book, Sylvia's professional testimony — honest and impartial — directly leads to a dangerous man going free. Do you think the novel is arguing that impartiality can itself be a kind of moral failure, or is it defending Sylvia's obligation to stay neutral?
- Angie Escudero tells Sylvia, "You're a bad woman... you let him go." How did you feel about Sylvia in that moment — did you side with her professional reasoning, with Angie's grief, or somewhere in between?
- Sylvia keeps a private habit hidden from everyone close to her. What did that small, ongoing secret add to your sense of who she is, especially set against a book so concerned with hidden truths and manipulation?
- Matt's betrayal, and the way it surfaces through Erin Tulley, unfolds slowly rather than as one big reveal. How did that pacing affect the tension for you compared to the main criminal case?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Santa Fe's wildfire smoke and heat show up again and again throughout the novel. What do you think that backdrop is doing thematically, beyond just setting the scene?
- As a forensic psychologist, Sylvia has to look for "some point of human entry" into even the worst offenders she evaluates — but she finds none in Anthony Randall. What do you make of a person the book presents as simply, fully without that entry point?
- If this is your first Sylvia Strange novel, how did the book handle bringing you up to speed on her world and relationships? If you've read Book 1, how did she feel different (or the same) here?
- Several characters in the book — Erin Tulley, Matt, even Sylvia herself — make choices driven by pride, hurt, or self-protection rather than pure logic. Whose choice in the book did you find hardest to forgive?
- The title is *Acquired Motive*. By the end of the book, whose motive do you think the title is really pointing to — and did your answer change as you got further into the story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Sarah Lovett

Sarah Lovett writes international and psychological thrillers about ordinary people forced into extraordinary choices. She is the coauthor of METAL VIPER, set against the shadow networks of modern Myanmar. Lovett is the creator of the bestselling Dr. Sylvia Strange psychological-thriller series (Random House; Simon & Schuster), inspired by her work researching criminal cases for the New Mexico Attorney General's Office. During a pause from the darkest subjects while raising her daughter, she collaborated with former CIA officer Valerie Plame on Blowback and Burned for Penguin; Blowback is under option for film (screenplay by Nicole Saad). Beyond crime and espionage, Lovett authored 35+ titles in the award-winning Extremely Weird children's series (recognized by the National Science Foundation and adapted as a network TV special). A Rockefeller Foundation grantee and former Padua Hills guest playwright, she continues to explore the costs of secrecy, the uses of power, and human resilience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WEBSITE: <https://sarahlovett.com/>

OTHER BOOKS: Dangerous Attachments, METAL VIPER (w. Ron Schultz), Blowback (w. Valerie Plame), Burned (w. Valerie Plame)