

BOOK CLUB RESOURCE GUIDE

LEGAL THRILLER



THANK YOU FOR CONSIDERING JUSTICE BENT FOR YOUR NEXT BOOK CLUB READ

BOOK CLUB
RESOURCE GUIDE

Stephen M. Murphy

Dutch Francis never expected to be a father in a courtroom drama, let alone this one. When his wife Ginnie, a local TV reporter, is nearly struck by gunfire while covering a Black Lives Matter protest. When Dutch recieves a call from his old friend Sam Dolorio, he's stunned when asked to help defend the shooter. Leon Rucker, a Black father of three, is facing a hate crime charge and a possible life sentence — and Sam needs a trial partner the jury will trust. Against every instinct, Dutch says yes, and is pulled into a case that gets more complicated by the day: a second hate crime charge against an entirely different man, a media firestorm his own wife is caught in the middle of, and a truth about what really happened that Saturday that no one — including Dutch — fully understands yet. Set against the backdrop of a country reckoning with race in real time, *Justice Bent* is a sharp, propulsive legal thriller about what justice actually looks like when everyone insists they already know the answer.

WORD COUNT: 72,000
PAGE COUNT: 270
KEY WORDS: Legal thriller, Racial justice, Hate crime law, Courtroom drama, Moral complexity
DEMOGRAPHICS: Readers who love courtroom dramas with real social weight
COMP BOOKS: A Time to Kill by John Grisham | Sycamore Row by John Grisham | Defending Jacob by William Landay

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Setting the mood

- Warm, low lighting
- A few legal pads and pens set at each place setting so guests can jot down thoughts or questions as they talk, echoing the book's courtroom note-taking.

Fun, easy props

- A small "exhibit" table with printed excerpts or discussion-question cards guests can draw from
- A simple nameplate or gavel as a centerpiece.

Clothing suggestions

- Smart-casual "courthouse" attire
- Blazers, button-downs, something a guest might wear to observe a trial
- Rather than costumes, given the book's real-world subject matter.

Music

- Play the provided curated Spotify Playlist

THEMED ACTIVITIES - The Verdict Is In

Closing Arguments

Split the group into two small teams and assign each a side of one of the book's central dilemmas (should Dutch have taken the case? was the second hate crime charge fair?); each team has two minutes to deliver a "closing argument" before the group votes.

Objection!

Read a series of statements (some true to the book, some invented) aloud; guests shout "Objection!" if they think a statement is false, then the group discusses.

News Anchor Trivia

A light round of questions about the book's plot details, framed as a "breaking news" quiz.

THEMED ACTIVITIES - The Verdict Is In

Comforting New England fare, echoing the book's New Hampshire setting and the family dinners that punctuate the story.

New England Clam Chowder

Serves 6–8

- 4 slices bacon, diced
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 3 medium potatoes, cubed
- 2 cups clam juice
- 2 cans (6.5 oz each) chopped clams, juice reserved
- 2 cups half-and-half
- 2 tbsp butter
- 2 tbsp flour
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Fresh chives, for garnish

Cook the bacon in a large pot until crisp; remove and set aside, leaving the fat in the pot. Sauté onion and celery until softened. Add potatoes, clam juice, and reserved clam liquid; simmer until potatoes are tender, about 15 minutes. In a separate small pan, melt butter and whisk in flour to make a roux; stir into the soup to thicken. Add the clams and half-and-half, and warm through without boiling. Season with salt and pepper, and garnish with bacon and chives.

THEMED MENU - Bar & Bench Bites

Roast Chicken with Root Vegetables

Serves 6

- 1 whole chicken (4–5 lbs)
- 3 carrots, chopped
- 3 parsnips, chopped
- 1 lb baby potatoes, halved
- 3 tbsp olive oil
- 2 tbsp fresh rosemary and thyme, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 425°F. Toss the vegetables with half the olive oil, herbs, garlic, salt, and pepper, and arrange in a roasting pan. Rub the chicken with the remaining oil and herbs, season generously, and place on top of the vegetables. Roast for 75–90 minutes, until the chicken reaches 165°F internally, basting occasionally.

French Fries

Serves 6

(a nod to the book's closing dinner scene)

- 4 large russet potatoes, cut into fries
- 3 tbsp vegetable oil
- Salt to taste

Preheat oven to 425°F. Toss the cut potatoes with oil and a generous pinch of salt, and spread in a single layer on a baking sheet. Bake for 30–35 minutes, flipping halfway, until golden and crisp.

THEMED MENU - Bar & Bench Bites



A New England riff on a classic, split down the middle — bitter and sweet in equal measure.

Ingredients

- 2 oz bourbon
- 3/4 oz fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 oz maple syrup (a nod to the New Hampshire setting)
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- Lemon twist, for garnish

Instructions

Combine bourbon, lemon juice, maple syrup, and bitters in a shaker with ice. Shake well and strain into a rocks glass over fresh ice. Garnish with a lemon twist. Serve slowly, and take your time deciding whose side you're on.

SIGNATURE DRINK - The Bent Justice

The Times They Are A-Changin' By Bob Dylan
Strange Fruit By Nina Simone
Fight the Power By Public Enemy
Alright By Kendrick Lamar
A Change Is Gonna Come By Sam Cooke
This Is America By Childish Gambino
Glory By Common & John Legend
Keep Ya Head Up By 2Pac
Freedom By Beyoncé feat. Kendrick Lamar
Get Up, Stand Up By Bob Marley & The Wailers
American Skin (41 Shots) By Bruce Springsteen
I Can't Breathe By H.E.R.
Formation By Beyoncé
Compared to What By Les McCann & Eddie Harris
Mississippi Goddam By Nina Simone



SPOTIFY MUSIC RECOMMENDATIONS



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

WARNING

- Dutch agrees to help defend Leon Rucker despite the fact that Rucker is connected to the shooting that nearly hurt Dutch's own wife. Could you have made that same decision? What do you think ultimately convinces him to say yes?
- The book charges two different men with hate crimes over the course of the story — one Black, one white. What did that dual structure add to your understanding of how the law is applied, and to whom?
- Ginnie's role as a journalist covering events that directly affect her own family creates real tension throughout the book. How did you feel about the way the novel handled the overlap between her professional and personal stakes?
- Sam Dolorio calls Dutch his "token white guy" for the defense team, referencing Atticus Finch almost as a warning. What do you make of that comparison, and how does the book's outcome differ from — or echo — that reference?
- The novel is set specifically in the weeks after George Floyd's death, with real events forming the backdrop. How did that grounding in a specific, real moment affect your reading experience?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Clifford Madrone's "Blackify" comment becomes a flashpoint in the book, separate from the main Rucker case. What did that subplot add to the novel's larger argument about how the public — and the legal system — assigns guilt?
- By the end of the book, both a Black defendant and a white defendant have faced hate crime charges tied to the same underlying events. Did the book's resolution feel fair to you? Why or why not?
- Dutch's closing argument line — that racism should have consequences, including financial ones — comes near the very end of the book. Did you find yourself agreeing with that framing, or did it feel too simple given everything that came before it?
- The novel balances heavy, real-world subject matter with Dutch's family life — his infant son, his marriage, small moments of humor. How did that balance work for you as a reader?
- If you were on the jury for either the Rucker case or the Madrone case, what verdict would you have reached — and what part of the book's evidence would have swayed you most?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Stephen M. Murphy is a judge in the San Francisco Superior Court, where he presides over civil trials, and an accomplished author known for his gripping legal thrillers. He graduated from the College of the Holy Cross and the University of San Francisco School of Law before serving as a law clerk in New Hampshire, where his work on a murder trial inspired his first Dutch Francis novel, Alibi. His writing, praised for its impeccable plotting and lifelike characters, explores the complexities of the legal system with authenticity and intrigue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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OTHER BOOKS: Beneath the Gavel