

Reading Guide: In the Neighborhood

Introduction

After his quiet suburban neighborhood is rocked by a brutal murder-suicide, Peter Lovenheim undertakes a somewhat unusual project: He decides to meet his neighbors...by inviting himself to sleep over.

Part memoir, part social experiment, part exploration of a central aspect of modern life, *In the Neighborhood* brings us inside the homes and everyday lives of several of Lovenheim's neighbors, and in the process helps us see our own lives in a new light. Lovenheim's heartfelt quest raises the question: What is lost when we live as strangers to each other, and how can we find a way to reconnect?

The following questions, designed for reader discussion, were composed by editor Mirian Lizzi of Penguin Publishing, who acquired and edited *In the Neighborhood*.

Discussion questions:

1. The incident that sparked Lovenheim's quest to get to know his neighbors was a murder-suicide a few houses away. Could this tragedy have been prevented if the residents on Sandringham Road had known each other more closely? Has there ever been a galvanizing incident of crime in a neighborhood where you have lived? What changes occurred as a result?
2. Some of Lovenheim's neighbors declined his request for a sleepover. How would you have responded to such a request?
3. Lou Guzzetta is a central figure in the book. What role does he play in Lovenheim's quest, and how does their friendship affect each of their perspectives?
4. Chapter 4, about Deb and Dave O'Dell, is called *The Top of Their Games*. How do these busy young professionals relate to the neighborhood around them? What does it say about the priorities of modern life that many people don't feel they have time to meet their neighbors?
5. Patti DiNitto's battle with cancer becomes an important part of Lovenheim's experiences on the block. Is her instinct toward privacy typical of how most people react to a life-threatening diagnosis? Would we benefit more from reaching out in times of crisis and need? As concerned neighbors, is there a line of privacy that should not be crossed?
6. Lovenheim spends time getting to know the street's mail carrier and newspaper delivery man. What do their perspectives add to the book? Can you surmise how the delivery people in your own neighborhood would describe the prevailing attitudes there?
7. Grace Field, known in the neighborhood only as *The Walker*, does not live on Sandringham. How is her view of the block different from that of its residents? Do you find it surprising that she does not wish she lived there, despite admiring its beautiful homes nearly every day for more than forty years?

8. Sandringham Road is part of an affluent neighborhood, with large homes occupied mostly by medical professionals who work at nearby hospitals. Does socio-economic status play a role in the lack of neighborliness there? Are the same issues relevant in more modest communities, or urban areas?
9. Lovenheim grew up on Sandringham Road, in the same house he now lives in as an adult. How does this perspective shape his sleepover project? Does his nearly lifelong connection to the block, along with memories from decades past, enhance or distance him from his neighbors today?
10. Childhood sleepovers were one of Lovenheim's inspirations for requesting to sleep over at his neighbors' houses, particularly waking up and having breakfast with his friends' parents in their intimate, everyday setting. Do you have fond (or not-so-fond) memories of glimpsing the daily routines of friends' families during sleepovers? Do these early experiences give kids a valuable perspective of life outside the cocoon of their own home lives?
11. In Chapter 5, Jamie Columbus describes the layout of a typical "tribal neighborhood," with individual homes arranged around a shared central space. Similarly, in Chapter 3, Grace Field bemoans the absence of front porches on Sandringham Road. How does shared open space—or a lack thereof—affect a community? Does your own neighborhood feature shared outdoor space, front porches, or other areas where residents spend time together?
12. In Chapter 8, Bill Fricke observes, "Without a dog, you could live next to someone for years and never know who they are." How do the dogs of Sandringham Road (including Lovenheim's dog Champ and Lou's schnauzer Heidi) affect the relationships on the block? Do dogs play a socializing role where you live?
13. What does Lovenheim ultimately conclude after completing his neighborhood experiment? Do you find his conclusions satisfying? Do you think he made a difference?
14. In the book's final chapter, Lovenheim describes being able to "read" the lights in many of his neighbors' homes as he strolls down the street one evening. Is this type of knowledge a benefit to the community, or does it cross the line of personal boundaries? Which type of block would you rather live on—one that fosters this type of knowledge, or one that doesn't?
15. The book's epilogue describes community-building efforts in various cities and towns across the country. Have you participated in any such efforts? Do they strike you as worthwhile?