

BURYING BEN READERS GUIDE

1. After troubled rookie police officer Ben Gomez commits suicide, Dot reflects that they had something in common, “the recognition that we both had an uncommon sensibility the others around us didn’t have. We were outsiders, displaced persons trying hard to fit in without losing too much of our souls.” In what ways are Dot and Ben outsiders in their respective positions?
2. Were you surprised to find that police pre-employment screening is not a failsafe system? What if anything did you know about this system before reading BURYING BEN? What did you learn? What surprised you about it?
3. Dot’s father was a bitter 60’s radical who would have been horrified by her joining “the enemy.” What do you think motivated her to work with police officers and their families? Given the revelations at the book’s end, to what extent do you think government institutions such as police departments and prosecutors’ offices serve people? To whom and to what extent are they “the enemy”? What is your opinion about law enforcement: Positive, negative, neutral or mixed? On what are your opinions based?
4. At one point, Dot wonders “Did therapy help women change the patriarchal structure or did it just help them adjust to an oppressive system?” What do you think about this statement? If an oppressive system doesn’t change, is adjusting to it a necessary compromise, or does it just prolong oppression?
5. Dot has a contentious relationship with troubled officer Eddie Rimbauer. Eddie deals with the stresses of the job by developing a callous, cynical shell. He rides and harasses sensitive Ben unmercifully. But Eddie’s coping mechanisms are imperfect too—he is drinking and eating himself to death. What do you think it takes to manage the stress of police work in a healthier way? What kinds of personality types might do better than others? Do police departments have a responsibility to help officers manage stress?
6. Reflecting on police training, Dot observes that “Common wisdom says it takes five years to become a good street cop – a hybrid human who is part priest, judge, counselor, rescuer and enforcer.” In what ways would a good police officer embody these five roles? How might they play out on the street?
7. “There is a near Olympic competition to police death,” Dot says. “Dying in the line of duty while doing battle with a crook gets the gold. The silver goes to the accidental on-duty deaths. On-duty deaths from heart attacks merit bronze. Suicide ranks a pitiful fourth.” Dying a peaceful death in old age isn’t even mentioned. What does this say about the culture of police officers? What are its values? What does it disdain?

8. From her years of working with police officers, Dot has found that “many cops start policing their own families when they’re kids, protecting Mom from Dad, looking after their younger siblings.” How did the family backgrounds of Eddie and Ben play into their decisions to become cops?
9. “There ought to be a statute of limitations on whining,” Eddie says. “After a while you have to shove the shit that happens to you out of your mind and move on. You have to get tough with yourself before you can be tough on anyone else.” This causes Dot to think of her father, ‘how he wore his broken life like a badge of honor, the brilliant student leader, clerking in the print shop for 30 years, clinging with pathological certainty to his own sad story in the belief that he was a hero.’ How do these very different coping strategies lead to getting trapped in destructive patterns of behavior?
10. Dot’s mother, in contrast to her father, is described as “a perpetual optimist...Where he saw evil, she saw a wounded spirit. Where he saw conspiracies, she saw a network of well intentioned, but ill-informed actors.” What parts of her parents do you see in Dot? How do you think their very different personalities influenced the path she took in life?