

Michael Dolan McCarthy

Discussion Questions
and some ideas for answers

How has Michael's mother changed since Swede's death?

Her confidence fell with job loss, then became dependent on the wrong guy and had her self-esteem attacked more. She met Lester in a bar, but there's no clear-cut description of alcohol or drug abuse other than the fact Michael is ready to accept her death as a suicide when he sees the bottle of pills.

Despite all the troubles Michael's had in his life, he's got a strong sense of responsibility and what's right. Where'd that come from?

Swede's example, lessons, and influence are clear. Also, his mother relied on him while she was alive, so taking responsibility for the kids when she dies is a natural step.

Shenia takes charge while Michael and the kids are in shock. What would have happened if she hadn't been there?

Answers will vary. Consider that Lester was still lurking about as well as what police and social services would have done.

Jimmy is resourceful. He thinks of removing the photos to slow down the police. When Michael decides they need to swap plates like Jimmy had suggested, what is his conflict?

They have to change plates to avoid being stopped by the police, but he knows it's illegal and wrong. Since he's now responsible for Jimmy, that means he's also responsible for setting a good example and guiding him. He's worried his example will speak louder than anything he ever says. This also applies to his driving without a license.

What do you think of Michael's reaction to flying off the road?

Opinions will vary.

What do Michael and his grandfather have in common besides the name?

They both feel guilty—Michael for the argument with his mother the night before she died, his grandfather for the phone call that cut off relations with his daughter. He feels so guilty he gives up his family farm to please his wife in her attempt to find their daughter and grandson.

Michael's grandfather feels guilty about throwing out Michael's stocking. Why and how has his guilt effected his life?

It was a symbol of hope that they'd eventually find Michael and his mother. When he threw it out, he threw out that hope and that became a wedge between him and his wife. When she died, he became too depressed to take care of himself. He didn't have any reason to get well and go home until the kids showed up and needed him.

Michael has always believed it's his fault his grandparents disowned his mother.

- **How common is that kind of break in families?**
- **Is race the only reason for that kind of break?**
- **Was race really the reason for the break in Michael's family?**

Parents disown children when they believe the kids are taking the wrong path; kids disown their parents when they believe it's the only way to be themselves.

Often substance abuse or other anti-social behavior leads to others saying "enough" and cutting off a relative.

Per Michael's grandfather, it wasn't just race—he didn't want her to drop out of college and he was put out that she'd gotten serious with this guy without introducing him to her parents—but he also admits worrying about how hard it would be for biracial grandkids.

Has Michael encountered problems because he's biracial?

He mentions some when he's talking with his grandfather. Also, he's very aware of what people will think when they see him and Shenia with the little white kids. He's very racially aware.

Michael is not technically savvy and has avoided computers at school to hide this.

- **Do you know anyone who doesn't have a cell phone, computer, eBook, etc.?**
- **Would it be embarrassing to not know how to use all those things?**
- **Do you avoid doing things everyone else seems to be good at?**
- **What are the problems with avoiding things you aren't good at?**

Answers will vary. Consider you don't get better at anything by not doing it.

Shenia's parents have had some rough times, too. Her mother has blamed the neighborhood for their son getting into trouble. Is that reasonable? What difference does a neighborhood make? Why?

Consider differences in values, ability to access childcare, and adult examples as well as the reasons gangs flourish more in some neighborhoods than others.

Lester's sister had him put into jail once, now she's helping him. Why has this happened and how could the system be improved?

He's come back to victimize her again. The system did not help her after he got out, because he served his full time instead of being on parole after getting out of prison.

Answer to how to improve the system will vary.