

# Southfield Public Library

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## *Detroit: an American autopsy by Charlie LeDuff*

*Discussion questions used at SPL August 11 & 12, 2015*

1. What are your initial impressions about the book? Did you find it interesting?
2. We have read a few books about the local Detroit area, how does this book compare to them? Did you enjoy reading about current events in the city or was it redundant, a rehash of old news?
3. Does the author present a “balance portrayal” or “a fair portrait” of the city and the residents?
4. How does the City of Detroit that LeDuff describes in this book compare to the Detroit you know? Are you a native Detroiter, suburbanite, or other? Does it matter? If you are not a native Detroiter, how does it compare to other cities in American?
5. In the prologue, the author Charlie states “... It is about living people getting on with the business of surviving in a place that has little use for anyone anymore except those left here... It is about the future of America and our desperate efforts to save ourselves from it.” page 7. What do you think the book is about? What is this book about for you? Now that you have finished reading the book, do you agree? Disagree? Why?
6. When you hear the word *autopsy*, what images does it bring up? What does the title imply/mean? Is it applicable? Has the author applied the word appropriately? Does the title raise your level of expectations about the book? Does it deliver or not?
7. In the Fire chapters, LeDuff reference the previous fires that have occurred in the city, 1863, 1943, and 1967. What did these fires have in common with one another? The fires/riots of the 1960’s are pretty famous for its media coverage. Had you heard the story behind that particular one cited in the book?
8. Do you remember any of the cases or city events that LeDuff refers to in the book? Does the author provide the reader with additional information or behind the scenes accounting of events that was not publicized?
9. The author intertwines personal information and revelations about his family throughout the book. What are your thoughts on this structure? Were you engaged or did you find it distracting?
10. Does the author bring a fresh and interesting prospective to local events and activities in and around Detroit?
11. Do you agree or disagree with the depictions of the city and its people as the author described them? Would you have wanted to read about other aspects of a news reporter’s life and the city in which he/she reports on?
12. The book is structured as part news reporting and part memoir. What do you think of the memoir sections of the book?
13. A Sunday Book Review reviewer stated that “...it is with regret that the book is written by a suburban white guy but...it is not”. Does it make a difference that the author reveals his ancestry contains a great grandfather/grandfather who was mulatto? Does that make LeDuff Black/African American and more credible? Is the book more believable if it were written by an African American native Detroiter?
14. The author list a few things and people that he believed contributed to the fall of the city, what things would you include? Would you remove anyone or anything? Who would you hold accountable when a city is dying? What things could be done to stop the decay, flight, corruption, etc.?

15. Is Detroit and its problems/issue different of any other big city in American? Are we unique in our politics and people?
16. Where do you think the problems of Detroit began? Do the problems of city predate Coleman Young? The author lays blame on the Coleman Young tenure/era and mayors after him. There is a subtle implication that the Coleman Young era was the ruination of the city of Detroit in the book. What are your thoughts?
17. Charlie LeDuff has been accused of making news himself or insinuating himself into the news story where he is as much of the news story as the subjects, victims, or newsmakers. Do you agree or disagree? How different is his approach to reporting news than others who mix their opinion and interpretation of the news?
18. The book ends with the author standing in a field looking at a fawn. What do you think the fawn symbolizes? Or do you think that the fawn is even a symbol?

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## *General discussion questions*

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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**Title: Book Club Discussion for the Las Vegas Non-fiction Book Club**

**Discussion questions taken from a website FOR THE LAS VEGAS NON-FICTION BOOK CLUB**

**website address <https://thecruxdefender.wordpress.com/2014/08/13/detroit-an-american-autopsy-discussion-questions/>**

Discussion questions:

1) The Strong Towns blog author, Charles Marohn, states: "For me, Detroit is both a fascinating and scary place. Fascinating because it is a glimpse into America's future and scary because the future is grim. I've long held that Detroit is not someone off place that we can discount but that it actually represents the logical outcome of the Suburban Experiment."

LeDuff opens his book with the same basic argument. We can pretend that Detroit is a case of corruption or incompetence or racial issues or globalization—and there are certainly many nuances and complexities—but at the end of the day, what has happened and is happening in Detroit has a lot of commonality with nearly every other city in this country.

**Is Detroit an anomaly, or the canary in the coal mine regarding the future of many American Cities? See also Stockton Bankruptcy Decision Only The**

**Beginning, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/01/stockton-bankruptcy\\_n\\_2993580.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/01/stockton-bankruptcy_n_2993580.html)**

2) Today's Detroit mirrors the conditions of an undeveloped nation. Call the police, they don't show up. If they do, it takes thirty minutes or more. Same with the fire department. People who can hire their own security. The rest carry weapons and travel in groups. Money is allocated for fixing things like the cracked floor at the fire hall, but nobody knows where it went.

**Should the rest of the nation contribute to prevent this pocket of extreme poverty from erupting in our midst? What are the limits of our federalist system? What about the state of Michigan?**

3) **What did you think of LeDuff's writing style? The journalism as pose-poetry style? The use of expletives? LeDuff's sometimes harsh descriptions of people.**

4) LeDuff asks the big questions up front. How did a city which was once America's richest become it's poorest? How did a city which once housed above one million souls shrink down to 700,000? There is another cottage industry which seeks to analyze this decline, and various suspects include the mayoral tenures of Coleman Young, race riots, institutional racism, free-trade agreements, outsourcing, oil prices, corporate mismanagement. LeDuff focuses on two of the more primal instincts: flight and greed.

**Do you think the book was informative in addressing how Detroit ended up in the present situation? Was the book informative in general?**

5). **What role in the story does Detroit's unique history and "traditions" hold in its demise?** For instance, there is Devil's Night; the fact the army has occupied the city three times, the 1967 race riot, and its history of corruption.

6). Detroit's recent history is one of flights. There was white flight, (and the richer blacks fled too), then industrial flight, and also brain drain (Graduates from Ann Arbor's University of Michigan are not likely to live in their home state again). Now there is 'dead flight', where those who can afford it exhume their relatives and move them to safer eternal resting grounds in the suburbs, so they will not have to endure the long trek out to the decayed inner center. There are three kinds of people left: those who cannot leave, out of duty or loyalty (the firemen and police), those who cannot leave because they are too poor to do so, and the thieves.

**What do you do with a city with a population too small to support its infrastructure and overhead? Is it permissible for a city to die?**

7). The book relates the tale of the importance of beavers to the city's early growth. All beavers on the Detroit River disappeared in the early part of the 20th Century, only to be recently spotted on the river for the first time in eighty years. **Is this a positive development? Are there any positive aspects to Detroit's current situation?**

8). **What policy recommendations would you offer if made Mayor of Detroit?**

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Other links:

Reference to the quote from page 54 regarding Nero, Rome, and firefighters:

<http://www.history.com/news/ask-history/did-nero-really-fiddle-while-rome-burned>