

Book Club/Discussion Questions for *Compulsion* by Meyer Levin

1. “Though the action is taken from reality,” Meyer Levin writes in his preface to *Compulsion*, “it must be recognized that thoughts and emotions described in the characters come from within the author, as he imagines them to belong to the personages in the case he has chosen.” What challenges—both ethical and artistic—might an author face in creating a fictionalized account of a true crime? To what extent do you think Levin has adhered to the “facts” or taken artistic license in *Compulsion*?
2. Some have called the Leopold and Loeb crime the “crime of the [20th] century.” Do you agree? Why or why not? What other crimes might “epitomize the thinking of their era,” as Levin phrases it?
3. Judd and Artie claim to have committed the crime without conventional motive, for the sole purpose of proving themselves superior beings. And as Marcia Clark suggests in her foreword to this edition, the lasting impact of the Leopold and Loeb crime may well stem “from the fact that, unlike in most other crimes, the motivation did not fall into any of the usual categories. Leopold and Loeb were not serial killers and this was not a crime of passion, greed, or revenge.” Do you agree? If not, which motives might rest behind their actions?
4. What is Sid’s role in this story? How would the book change if his point of view were not included?
5. The Leopold and Loeb trial was groundbreaking in its use of psychiatric and psychoanalytical evidence. How do you think the courts have changed in their views regarding such evidence? Is it important to consider such evidence when deciding a person’s guilt or punishment?
6. *Compulsion* has been compared to a number of other “documentary novels” or “nonfiction novels,” among them Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*, Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, and Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*. How are these books similar, and how are they different?
7. Readers generally find it difficult to finish reading a novel whose two main characters are entirely unsympathetic. Yet in *Compulsion*, despite the terrible nature of the crime, Levin creates sympathy for his characters without excusing their crimes. How does he accomplish this? Do you feel equal sympathy for both characters? Why or why not?
8. How have views towards sexuality—specifically homosexuality, and courtship—changed since *Compulsion* was written? How might Judd and Artie’s relationship be viewed today? In what ways was the depiction of homosexuality in *Compulsion* groundbreaking for its time?
9. Why is it significant that Judd and Artie are young Jewish men from a Jewish neighborhood?
10. In his introduction to this edition of his father’s novel, Gabriel Levin suggests that “... though on the surface a psychological thriller,” *Compulsion* “should be read as well as an extended meditation on the darker side of humanity in the wake of the Holocaust.” How is this so? How might the events in *Compulsion* and Nietzschean theories about superior men speak to the Holocaust?