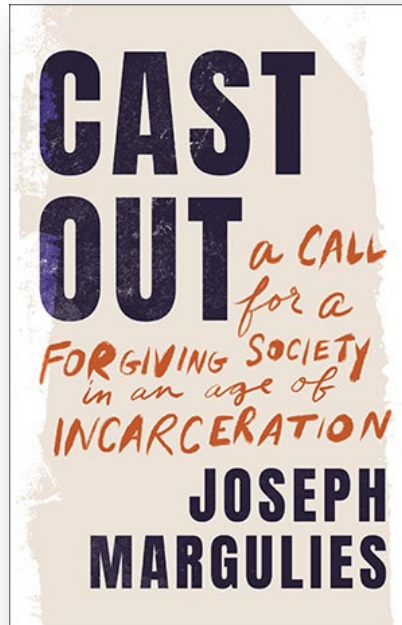


Cast Out: A Call for a Forgiving Society in an Age of Incarceration
by Joseph Margulies

Readers' Guide Discussion Questions



1. In his introduction, Joseph Margulies writes that the United States has become “unrecognizable” to him, which he traces to a cultural celebration of cruelty. “Yes, as a country we have been cruel many times before, and yes, not everyone behaves this way. But I can’t think of a time when so many people were so *enthusiastically* cruel, and when this enthusiasm for viciousness had achieved such cultural dominance.” What do you think of this diagnosis? Has an “enthusiasm for viciousness” achieved “cultural dominance” in the United States?
2. At the center of *Cast Out* is the idea of a forgiving society, which he describes as more of a perspective than a set of rules. He says that judgment in a forgiving spirit “produces an orientation, a way of understanding society and its members, which includes those who betray it as much as those betrayed by it. This orientation takes its shape from the countless interactions between transgressors and the society that would hold them to account. An observer who knew nothing of a forgiving society would watch these interactions and say that this is a people that does not judge until it first struggles to understand. It does not dwell excessively on either the failings of the individual or the society of which she is a part. Instead, it accepts the challenge of understanding and giving effect to the tangled history that binds each to the other, for in meeting this challenge, the forgiving society reveals and honors the shared humanity of all who live within it.” How would society change if it judged wrongdoers in this spirit? How would your own life change?

3. Margulies uses the treatment of Klete Keller by the *New York Times* to introduce the idea of a forgiving society. Yet Keller's crime, for which he was pardoned, was much less serious than that of the six people Margulies profiles in *Cast Out*. Does this detract from his idea? Can a case be made that society should judge Keller in a "spirit of forgiveness" but not the others?
4. Margulies insists there is a difference between an explanation and an excuse —"one accounts while the other absolves"—and that the six histories he relates are meant to explain rather than excuse the crimes that took place. Are you persuaded by this distinction, or do you think Margulies is actually trying to excuse what occurred? Do you think these histories excuse the crimes that followed?
5. One theme that runs through *Cast Out* is the transformative power of education: Eric Matthews graduated from the Seminary at Angola; Richard Rivera, who was illiterate when he got to prison, ended up getting several advanced degrees behind bars; Lucas Whaley attended college courses through the Cornell Prison Education Program. What do you see as the connection between education and a forgiving society?
6. Another theme in *Cast Out* is empathy and the power of loss. Lucas Whaley began to feel the enormity of his crime after the death of his girlfriend; David Medina's transformation began after the death of his daughter; for Richard Rivera, the pivotal moment began with his time in the AIDS ward at Greenhaven. Yet some people attack empathy as producing a mindless compassion for those who do not deserve it. What do you think: Does empathy contribute to a forgiving society, or does it lead us astray?
7. Though Margulies profiles people who have committed serious crimes, his hope for a forgiving society goes beyond the treatment of people in prison. "A bloated carceral state is a symptom of an unforgiving society, but it is not the sickness. When I decry the determination to cast people out and imprison them in their past, I do not mean simply the two million people behind bars or the five million under carceral supervision, or even the tens of millions who have a criminal record. Imprisonment takes many forms, and no one needs to spend a night in jail to feel the sting of an unforgiving society; degradation, humiliation, and ostracism have more in common with incarceration than many people care to acknowledge." If you were writing a follow-up to *Cast Out* that took its ideas beyond criminal justice, who would you profile and why?
8. Margulies says his goal is to encourage people "to see us in them and them in us"? Can you recognize yourself in someone who has done a great wrong?
9. Who or what is your whatabout?