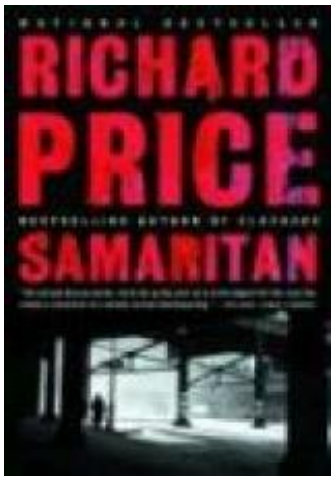
ReadingGroupGuides
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Samaritan

by Richard Price



About the Book

Ray Mitchell, a former TV writer who has left Hollywood under a cloud, returns to urban Dempsy, New Jersey, hoping to make a difference in the lives of his struggling neighbors. Instead, his very public and emotionally suspect generosity gets him beaten nearly to death. Ray refuses to name his assailant, which makes him intensely interesting to Detective Nerese Ammons, a friend from childhood, who now sets out to unlock the secret of his reticence. Set against the intensely realized backdrop of urban America, the cat and mouse game that unfolds is both morally complex and utterly gripping.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel begins as Ray tells his daughter Ruby a story from his boyhood in the Hopewell Houses. What is the significance of such stories for Ray? How good a storyteller is he? What is the effect of framing the plot within the story of Tweetie's injury and his attempt to help her?

2. Chapter 5 gives an account of the information Bobby Sugar has gathered on Ray, including credit card charges and bank withdrawals, medical history, employment, address changes, etc. What does this chapter tell us about the way police detectives shape their view of a person and his or her possible motivations? How is that process similar to, or different from, the way a novelist creates a character?

3. Compare the book's epigraph from Matthew 6:1?3 to the scene in which Ray, with Ruby present, gives Carla a check for the full amount of her son's funeral [p. 109]. Ray's ex-wife Claire comments, "Ray likes to save people, you know, sweep them off their feet with his generosity. It's a cheap high if you've got the money, but basically it's all about him" [p. 125]. How serious is this flaw in Ray's character, and why does Price make Ray's desire to help the novel's central theme?

4. What is the effect of the novel's structure --- with chapters moving back and forth in time --- on your reading experience? Why might Price have chosen to construct the plot in this way?

5. In one of Nerese's many moments of insight, she muses about Ray:

"The constant white-black casting made her uncomfortable --- no, made her angry; but that anger was tempered by the intuition that this compulsion in him wasn't really about race; that the element of race, the chronic hard times and neediness of poor blacks and Latinos was primarily a convenience here, the schools and housing projects of Dempsy and other places like a stocked pond in which he could act out his selfish selflessness over and over?and that he was so driven by this need, so swept away by it, that he would heedlessly, helplessly risk his life to see it played out each and every time until he finally drew the ace of spades, or swords, and got the obituary that would vindicate him, bring tears to his eyes; key word, 'beloved,' if only he could figure out some way to come back from the dead long enough to read it." [p. 215]

In Nerese's view, Ray is driven primarily by narcissism, by an obsessive desire to be needed and to be thanked. Is her observation correct? Does this motive outweigh the good that Ray tries to do?

6. How incisive is Price as an analyst of race relations? In his desire to "give back," is there any way for Ray to be comfortable about race, to enter his old community as an affluent white man offering help? Does Ray recognize that in giving Carla the money for the funeral he humiliates her, winning her resentment rather than her gratitude [pp. 109?110]?

7. Is Nerese the moral and emotional anchor of the novel? Why or why not? Given that she and Ray have come from the same place, how have they handled their lives differently? What are the differences in psychology of these two characters? What motivates them?

8. Discuss the relationship between Ruby and Nelson, two children of nearly the same age who are thrown together by Ray and Danielle's sexual liaison. Why does Ruby refuse to apologize to Nelson when she hits him with the softball? What is the meaning of the story Ruby shares with Ray's writing class [pp. 353?54]? Why does Price make children such a crucial part of the story?

9. Is Ray exploiting Danielle, or is she exploiting him in their sexual relationship? What motivates Danielle to involve herself and her son with Ray? She sees herself as an independent and self-motivated woman; Ray sees her as a woman who has chosen to stay in a marriage with a drug dealer [pp. 198?201]. Who is right?

10. Samaritan is a drama of redemption, or self-redemption. Why is shame referred to as one of Ray's defining characteristics? Does he have good reason to feel ashamed of himself? Why does Ray need to redeem himself? How successful is he in his efforts to do so?

11. Who is the most likely suspect for the crime against Ray --- Salim, Freddy Martinez, Danielle? To what degree is suspense --- the "whodunit" quality --- important in a novel like this?

12. How does the character of Salim come across? Why does **Samaritan** end with Salim, and a chapter called "Thank You" [pp. 370?77]?

13. Discuss Chapter 32, in which Nerese and Ray tell each other about their future plans. What do we learn about Nerese's past and the way it shaped her life? What is she trying to tell Ray about adults' responsibility to children? Does it seem that Nerese will be happier once she retires from the police department?

14. In a blurb for the hardcover Elmore Leonard stated, "I read Richard Price for the cool, spare sound of his writing, his words, the language he has in his bag that fits so exactly in his settings. The characters talk the talk." Do you agree with his assessment? Find a few passages that exemplify Price's strengths as a stylist and discuss their qualities with your group.

15. With **Samaritan**, Richard Price again reveals himself to be committed to writing novels that awaken his readers to raw and painful social problems. Charles Taylor commented:

"It seems to me that in reporting on some of society's bedrock institutions (in this case, prisons and the police) and on communities that many of us are either cut off from or see solely in terms of social problems (thus robbing the inhabitants of their individuality) Price is doing work that we should expect from our major novelists. . . . Though **Samaritan** is his bleakest book, you put it down convinced he is trying to find, in the midst of racial and economic divisions, the things that we share. He's the reporter-novelist as despairing humanist." [Salon.com]

How powerful is **Samaritan**'s social vision? Does it have a message or a lesson for its readers? What questions and issues does the novel leave unresolved?

Author Bio

Richard Price is the author of several novels --- including LAZARUS MAN, CLOCKERS and LUSH LIFE --- all of which have won universal praise for their vividly etched portrayals of urban America. He has written for television dramas, including "The Night Of," "The Deuce" and "The Wire," as well as numerous screenplays, including *Sea of Love* , *Ransom* and *The Color of Money*, directed by Martin Scorsese, for which he received a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. He lives in Manhattan with his wife, the novelist Lorraine Adams.

Critical Praise

"A whodunit with substance and suspense?Price is known for terrific dialogue, and there are moments when you feel as if you are listening to [his characters] speak, not just reading words on a page?It's the most interesting kind of mystery?one in which the villain is not so easy to spot even when we know who committed the crime."--- *USA Today* "Engaging?provocative?Price has a fine ear for the subtle tension between sentimentality and real devotion, and he understands the way that chronic black poverty plays into the needs of 'the selflessly selfish.' If this is a novel that raps the knuckles of a helping hand, it's nonetheless one to grab on to."--- *The Christian Science Monitor*"Giving new meaning to the term "inner city," Price yields up not just the familiar, blanched moonscape of urban blight but the inner lives and jackhammering hearts of those who pace and patrol it."--- *The New Yorker*"A dream of a book?a supremely suspenseful novel (with a denouement that will leave you marveling at how artfully the author kept us from guessing the perpetrator's identity), but to call it a thriller would be selling it short. Part police procedural, part high-wire

psychodrama, part social study, it's a wholly engrossing hybrid that packs an emotional wallop?."--- *Entertainment Weekly*

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