

Killers of the Flower Moon Discussion Guide

Introduction

Like many Indigenous Tribes, the Osage Nation was forced by the U.S. government to relinquish its ancestral homelands to accommodate the growing onslaught of European settlers in the 19th century. Originally, Osage lands spanned nearly 100 million acres, but in the early 1800s they were reduced to a small reservation in present-day Kansas. Soon settlers began to covet that land as well, and within a generation, the Osage people were pushed out of their homes once again—this time to Indian Territory in what is now known as Oklahoma.

Two decades later, oil was uncovered in the new Osage lands, generating extraordinary wealth for the Tribe and attracting the attention of outsiders who wanted it for themselves. Many Osage people were targeted for their headrights¹ to the oil-rich land, and in the 1920s at least 60 were murdered in what has been called the “Reign of Terror.” Adapted from a nonfiction book by David Grann, the new film *Killers of the Flower Moon* brings these events to life, focusing on Mollie Burkhart and the sisters she lost at the hands of her violent husband and his family.

The discussion questions provided below help audiences think more deeply and critically about *Killers of the Flower Moon*, the very real history it brings to light, and the effect that history still has today. However, it is important to remember that the movie portrays just *one story* from *one Tribe* at *one point in time*. The Osage Nation is not defined by the Reign of Terror. Their history is expansive as time, and they continue to persist as a sovereign nation today. Additionally, there are 573 other American Indian/Alaska Native Tribes and communities in the U.S. with their own vast histories and diverse cultures—and harrowing stories that may never be projected on the big screen. With this in mind, you are encouraged to take part in the [ELCA’s Truth and Healing Movement](#). The truth, and our knowing and embracing it, is the first step toward healing for all of us.

Discussion Questions

1. What were your emotions or physical reactions while watching the film? How did you feel as you walked away from watching it? How long did that feeling last?
2. The film opens with an introduction from Martin Scorsese, the movie’s director and screenwriter. Speaking directly to the camera, he says *Killers of the Flower Moon* is a “deeply personal story to me.” What purpose does Scorsese’s statement serve? What effect does it have? Why do you think he introduces the movie instead of an Osage person, such as an elder, a Tribal official, or a descendant of Mollie? If the introduction had been given by an Osage person, how do you imagine it might have differed from Scorsese’s statement?
3. Lily Gladstone (Siksikaitsitapi and Nimiipuu), who plays Mollie Burkhart, has called the role “a great responsibility” and “terrifying.” Why do you think Lily feels this way about a movie role?
4. Before she can spend money, Mollie must receive authorization from a non-Native “guardian” assigned by the U.S. because the government deems her “incompetent” to manage her own

¹ A “headright” is the right to receive a quarterly distribution of funds derived from the Osage Mineral Estate. See www.osagenation-nsn.gov/who-we-are/minerals-council/frequently-asked-questions.

finances. What makes Mollie incompetent? Why would the government have an interest in controlling her finances? How would you feel in Mollie's position? What would you do?

5. Two of Mollie's sisters are murdered. Her mother and another sister die under suspicious circumstances. Mollie is almost killed by her own husband. A hundred years later, Indigenous women and girls continue to be murdered or to disappear—and authorities and the general public continue not to care. How does the violence against Osage women during the Reign of Terror relate to the ongoing [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women \(MMIW\) crisis](#)?
6. While reading a book on Osage history and culture, Ernest notes an illustration with the caption "Can you see the wolves in this picture?" What "wolves" did you see in the movie, and why did you perceive them as such? Are there any "wolves" that were not on-screen but whose presence is alluded to or implied?
7. Ernest is portrayed alternately as a brazen villain and a loving husband and father with a heavy conscience. At one point the investigator Tom White says to him, "Your uncle has made you do bad things because of your disposition." Do you agree with this statement? Is Ernest a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Whose perspective is privileged in how Ernest is portrayed?
8. Sin is clear in the actions of Ernest and "King" Hale. Describe the other sinful actions and structures you noticed. For instance, try to describe how other white people portrayed in the film sinned through what they did and what they left undone. Sin is also present in the laws, policies, and practices that enable violence and exploitation. Where did you see the sinful structures (laws, policies, or practices that harmed neighbors) in the film?
9. What tropes or stereotypes of Native people are presented in the movie?
10. What was your reaction to Mollie's practice of the Catholic faith *and* traditional Osage lifeways? Though the movie does not address it, we can infer that Mollie was sent to an Indian boarding school as a child. What is your understanding of the U.S. Indian boarding school era? What was the church's role in boarding schools historically? What is the church's role in addressing the legacy of boarding schools today?
11. While the Doctrine of Discovery originated in 15th-century Europe, it continued to shape people and the U.S. legal system throughout history—as it still does today. How are the effects of the Doctrine of Discovery evident in *Killers of the Flower Moon*? How are they evident today? As Lutherans, what role do we play in the calling to [repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery](#), both in the life of the church and in our individual lives?
12. The final scene of the movie centers on contemporary Native people in regalia, joining in traditional dance and song. What is the meaning of this final scene? What does it imply about the Osage Nation? What does it imply about Indigenous peoples and communities in the U.S. today?
13. After watching the film, what do you want to learn more about? What do you feel called to do?

To learn more about how you can become part of the ELCA's Truth and Healing Movement, go to elca.org/Indigenous. For resources specifically on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, including a candlelight vigil service you can host in your community, go to elca.org/mmiw.

To learn more about what the ELCA teaches about sexism and gender-based violence, go to elca.org/womenandjustice and read the social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action*. Go to elca.org/socialmessages to find the social message "Gender-based Violence." Both resources come with study guides and supplementary resources for personal and group use.