

FALSE HOPE Book Club Questionnaire

Welcome to our book club meeting! Tonight, we're diving into Steve Shipley's *FALSE HOPE*, the third installment in the Blake Willis Thriller Series. This book promises a thrilling ride, exploring complex themes against a backdrop of global crime and high-stakes intrigue.

Book Synopsis: FALSE HOPE

FALSE HOPE (Blake Willis Thriller Series Book 3) plunges cybersecurity expert Blake Willis into a high-stakes global race against time following the audacious theft of *The Saint John's Bible*, a priceless religious artifact insured for a billion dollars. The meticulously planned crime involves coordinated thefts across multiple continents and the brutal murder of Father Patrick Sullivan, pulling Blake into an investigation that unexpectedly unearths a chilling connection to his own family history and a vast network of powerful adversaries.

Reluctantly drawn back into action despite the lingering trauma of his wife Rebecca's past kidnapping, Blake must delicately balance his family's safety with his deep-seated drive to "do good". Aided by his brilliant wife Rebecca, who expertly employs advanced **digital forensics** and navigates the treacherous **dark web**, and his tech genius employee, Robert "Blizzard" Baumgartner, Blake begins to unravel a sinister network of high-end collectors and shadow economies. Their primary suspect emerges as **Otto Schellinger**, an "evil billionaire" and notorious art collector who masterfully uses philanthropy as a façade for his illicit acquisitions and who doesn't hesitate to eliminate threats.

As the investigation intensifies, Blake sends Blizzard's second-cousin, Lucie Bouchard, an untested covert operative, but a competent art historian with self-defense skills and a morally ambiguous past, undercover to infiltrate Schellinger's inner circle, posing as the Master of Ceremonies for his charity gala. The mission escalates into a dangerous game of cat and mouse, further complicated by an unexpected twist involving a Saudi billionaire and potential terrorist funding. Ultimately, Blake and his elite team, including Australian Federal Police operative Bronko Nowakowski, devise a perilous plan to intercept the Bible and rescue Lucie, leading to a tense, non-violent confrontation that tests their limits and challenges Blake's evolving moral compass. *FALSE HOPE* explores profound themes of **power, corruption, family loyalty, and the relentless pursuit of justice** in a world where immense wealth can seemingly buy anything, but true integrity often comes at a priceless cost.

Book Club Discussion Questions

Here are ten questions to kick off our discussion, designed to encourage a deep dive into the novel's themes and characters. We'll aim to spend about five to ten minutes on each question. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers!

1. **Opening the Book & The Bible's Significance:** *FALSE HOPE* revolves around the theft of *The Saint John's Bible*, which is described as "a priceless religious artifact," and "a masterpiece of faith, art, and scholarship." What was your initial impression of the Bible's significance to the plot, and how did its theft immediately set the tone for the thriller?
2. **Blake Willis: The Reluctant Hero:** Blake Willis is portrayed as a "middle-aged corporate security consultant," who is a reluctant hero. How does his personal history, particularly Rebecca's past kidnapping and his newfound billionaire status, influence his decision to get involved in such a dangerous mission, despite his initial hesitation?
3. **The Role of Technology:** Rebecca and Blizzard utilize "advanced computer technology," "the dark web," and "digital forensics" extensively in their investigation. Discuss how the pervasive use of technology, including **deepfakes and AI**, shapes the nature of the crimes and the methods of detection in the book.
4. **Moral Ambiguity and Vigilante Justice:** The team often operates outside traditional legal frameworks, especially given the apparent corruption within Swiss authorities. Do you believe Blake and his team are justified in employing a form of vigilante justice and making "morally gray choices" to achieve their goals? How does this approach impact your perception of their heroism?
5. **Otto Schellinger: The Evil Billionaire:** Otto Schellinger is a classic "evil billionaire" who uses his wealth, power, and influence to orchestrate crimes and manipulate systems, presenting a life of luxury and philanthropy as a façade for his illicit activities. Discuss the effectiveness of this antagonist trope and how his character highlights the themes of corruption and the underground economy.
6. **Lucie Bouchard's Undercover Mission:** Lucie Bouchard is sent undercover to infiltrate Otto's world. Her character is described as an "untested covert operative, yet competent art historian" who is determined, seductive, and dangerously close to the truth. How does her personal journey and the risks she takes contribute to the suspense and moral complexity of the narrative? Consider her internal conflict and the moral compromises she contemplates.
7. **Loyalty and Betrayal:** The theme of "loyalty vs. betrayal" is prominent throughout the book, especially concerning Carl Dodge and Lucie Bouchard. How do the revelations about Carl Dodge's involvement and Lucie's precarious position challenge Blake's trust, and how effectively does the book explore the fluid nature of loyalty in high-stakes situations?

8. **The “En Route” Strategy:** The team ultimately decides to retrieve the Bible “en route” rather than directly attacking Otto’s heavily fortified estate. Discuss the strategic thinking behind this decision. What were the perceived pros and cons of this approach compared to other options?
 9. **Justice Achieved or Compromised?:** Despite the recovery of the Bible and Lucie’s safety, Otto Schellinger is ultimately placed under **house arrest** rather than facing full prosecution, with charges like the deaths of Father Patrick and Carl Dodge not formally made. Do you feel that justice was truly served in this outcome, or was it a necessary compromise given the circumstances?
 10. **Blake’s Personal Evolution:** By the end of the book, Blake accepts a role in **Orion**, a clandestine partnership between the US, UK, and Australia. How has his journey throughout *FALSE HOPE*, including confronting his family’s dark history and his renewed search for faith, prepared him for this new commitment and potential future clandestine missions?
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Optional Questions (if time permits)

- **The Role of the Willis Family Farm:** The farm is a recurring setting and plays a role in Blake’s family history and future plans. How does the “Urban and Rural Contrasts” trope apply, and what symbolic significance does the farm hold for Blake and his understanding of his family legacy?
- **Women in the Narrative:** The series overview explicitly emphasizes “strong female characters”. Beyond Rebecca and Lucie, discuss other prominent female characters like Jessica Hope and Genoveva Milano. How do these women contribute uniquely to the plot and the overarching themes of the series?
- **The Element of *FALSE HOPE*:** The title of the book is *FALSE HOPE*. In what specific instances did characters experience or give “false hope” throughout the narrative, and how did these moments contribute to the suspense or thematic development?
- **Connecting to the Wider Series:** *FALSE HOPE* is Book 3 of the Blake Willis Thriller Series. For those who have read previous books (*FALSE TRUST*, *FALSE START*), how does this installment build upon or deepen the “layered conspiracies” and “multi-generational family dynamics” established earlier in the series?
- **Author’s Craft:** The author notes that while the novel is fiction, elements like The Saint John’s Bible and Minnesota 13 whiskey are inspired by real-world history. How did the inclusion of these real-world elements enhance your reading experience or sense of realism in the thriller?