

**MYSTERIOUS CALIFORNIA: FOUR AUTHORS**  
**DISCUSSIONS QUESTIONS**

**QUESTIONS TO POSE AFTER READING**  
***Shell Games* by Kirk Russell**

*Shell Games*, the first of Kirk Russell's John Marquez novels, takes place along the northern California coast and features a unique sleuth: an ex-DEA agent who now heads a special investigative unit of the California Department of Fish and Game. The scope of the majestic north coast is a major character in this gripping tale.

Characters:

John Marquez, head of a special operations unit of the Department of Fish and Game and a former DEA agent

Katherine, wife

Maria, step-daughter

Sue Petersen, Special Operations Unit colleague

Mark Davies, diver and informant

Tran Li, poacher

Mark Heinemann, dope peddler and poacher

Ed Keeler, Deputy chief of Fish & Game

Al Fields, detective

Eugene Kline, bad guy

1. Kirk Russell writes in the acknowledgements of one of the Marquez books, "I've written three Marquez novels with the belief that if I wrote a good enough story I could help those who have devoted so much to saving open country and the wildlife in it. I hope in some small way I've done that." Do you think he accomplished that in "Shell Games?" Did he make you, the reader, care about the abalone?
2. Russell says he wanted to create a hero in Marquez who is strong, fair and gentle. How did you feel about John Marquez? Would you trust this man? Is he a different kind of male detective hero?
3. John Marquez is grappling with some personal issues in "Shell Games," e.g. tensions in his marriage to Katherine and worries about his step-daughter Maria's possible eating disorder. Did knowledge of his personal life influence your views of him as a character?

4. Russell looks at abalone poaching from two sides – the criminal networks and then poachers such as Tran Li, a Vietnamese immigrant who has already been arrested once for poaching. Marquez seems to differentiate between the two sides. He clearly empathizes with Tran Li and tries to help him. Do you perceive a difference between the two different kinds of criminals? Do you think it is appropriate for Marquez to treat them differently?
  
5. The SOU detective is a unique kind of detective for crime fiction. We learn in “Shell Games” that the Fish & Game agents are paid one of the lowest salaries in law enforcement. After learning more about the work of an agent, do you think we should make it a bigger priority to pay them more?