



The Sweetness of Tears

By Nafisa Haji
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Questions for Discussion

1. The novel opens with an epigraph from the poet Kahlil Gibran. How does this set the tone for the story that follows?
2. Talk about the title, *The Sweetness of Tears*. What significance does it hold for the story? What meaning do you take away from it?
3. The story begins with Jo, the daughter of devout Christians, revealing her doubt. Where does this feeling come from? Why do so many people consider doubt to be a weakness or a failing? Is doubt a form of imprisonment or an expression of freedom? How does doubt affect the novel's characters, especially Jo? What about certainty? Would you rather lead a life filled with certainty or do you

welcome doubt? Why?

4. Are faith and belief the same thing? Think about the story of Adam and Eve. Why is ignorance seen as bliss and knowledge evil? How does this conflict play out in the various characters' lives, especially Jo and her brother, Chris? How does faith comfort and uphold the characters? How does it betray them? How can faith be liberating, and how can it be oppressive?
5. The novel is told through the voices of several characters. Why do you think the author chose this method? How do their viewpoints add to the story as it unfolds? How might it be different if it were only told from Jo's point of view? How does this narrative style reflect the novel's themes?
6. When Jo first meets Sadiq he tells her the story of the crocodile and the monkey. How is the moral of this fable interwoven in the novel? Deena also speaks of it when she meets Jo. What insights does she share with her granddaughter? Lessons that she learned from her own father?
7. Sadiq also shares memories of his youth, of the Shia women honoring their holy season and the story of Karbala. Do you see parallels in this story and those of the novel's characters?
8. Deena speaks to Jo about 'jungle law'—me against you, us against them—that is the way of the world when it is in chaos. How can we overcome jungle law and can we avert chaos? Why might some people choose chaos over love and understanding?
9. Talk about the characters' names: Jo, Chris, Angela, Faith, Deena, Jake, Sadiq. What are their meanings and how do they reflect the characters themselves?
10. Compare and contrast the characters and their relationships. How do the wrongs of one generation affect the other? What keeps them separate from each other? How do they eventually come together? What defines 'otherness'? What keeps some people from embracing 'the other'—whether they are a believer or non-believer, Christian or Muslim, Sunni or Shia, soldier or activist?
11. According to Jo's grandmother, Faith, the most liberating words are, 'I don't understand. I don't know.' Do you agree with her? Are you able to admit when you don't know or understand? Why is doing so hard for some people?
12. Many of the characters carry secrets. How does this hidden knowledge impact their actions and who they are?
13. At one point Angela's brother, Ron, a televangelist, challenges his mother. 'You're starting to sound like one of those hippie Christians again. That lefty, liberal, mealy mouthed version of Christianity that you preach, Mom—making Jesus out to be some kind of spaced-out, long-haired peacenik with no muscle in his words—it's just an attempt to make religion weak, to make God into something ineffectual and effeminate.' What do you think about Ron's comment? Would you call him a man of God?
14. After Chris's car crash, Angela tried to 'scrub his life clean' of tragic reminders. Why? Do you agree with her? What makes her so fearful of the truth? Many soldiers, like Chris, have trouble adjusting to home after the horror and tragedy they have witnessed and often participated in, either directly or indirectly. While we hear reports about war's progress, should we hear more about the long-term effects on soldiers and civilians? Why don't we hear more about war's long-lasting consequences? Think about your own daily life. As of 2011, America is still involved in two wars. How often does the war cross your mind in an average day?
15. One of the novel's themes is forgiveness. How does forgiveness play out in the lives of the various characters? What are some of the other themes at the novel's heart? How are they conveyed? Use some examples from the book to highlight your discussion.
16. What did you learn from reading *The Sweetness of Tears*? What will you remember most about the book?