

READERS' GROUP GUIDE

A VERY LARGE EXPANSE OF SEA BY TAHEREH MAFI

AUTHOR'S NOTE

A Very Large Expanse of Sea is based on the true events of my life in high school. It's 2002, a year after 9/11. It's an extremely turbulent time politically, not only for our country, but for a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl who wears hijab.

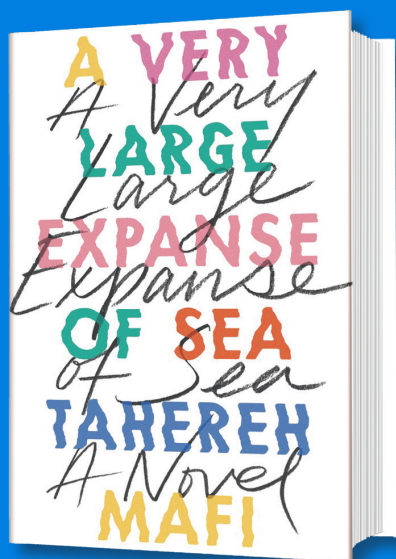
That was me. (It was also many, many others. But this is my particular story.)

The book, though steeped deeply in truth, is fictionalized for the sake of scale and efficiency. At the onset of the book, Shirin is both frustrated with and heartbroken by the world, and by the end of it she will find peace in unlearning her anger. This story is about fear and hatred and the devastating impact of bigotry and xenophobia. But it's also about falling in love for the first time. It's about recovering hope. It's about believing in people again. (And it's about the years I spent breakdancing with my brothers.)

A Very Large Expanse of Sea is, ultimately, about understanding that love is the unexpected weapon, and that, sometimes, the people who make life worth living are often right there, right in front of us, if only we're smart enough to open our eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tahereh Mafi is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Shatter Me series, *Whichwood*, and *Furthermore*. She was born in a small city somewhere in Connecticut and currently resides in Santa Monica, California, with her husband, Ransom Riggs. She can usually be found over-caffeinated and stuck in a book. You can find her online just about anywhere @TaherehMafi or on her website, www.taherehbooks.com.



BOOKTALK

It's 2002, a year after 9/11. It's an extremely turbulent time politically, but especially so for someone like Shirin, a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl who's tired of being stereotyped. So she's built up protective walls and refuses to let anyone close enough to hurt her, until she meets Ocean James.

GRADES 9 AND UP

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

RESISTANCE

1. When discussing people's perception of Shirin, Jacobi says "You *can't* be angry all the time . . . Just try to be happy. Your happiness is the one thing these assholes can't stand" (pg. 108). What does this inspire Shirin to do? How does this shift the way she thinks about herself and the people around her? Do you think joy can be an act of resistance?
2. In chapter six, Shirin describes the history of breakdancing battles as an alternative to violence. What is Shirin battling every day? How does she fight? How does she protect herself? How do music and breakdancing protect and steady her? What do you battle in your own life? What are your weapons?
3. When Shirin is targeted in a hate crime, the police arrive and say "I'm sorry, kid, but it's like you're asking for it. Don't make yourself a target" (pg. 181). If Shirin stops wearing her hijab, she might no longer be targeted for her physical appearance, but does anything about society change? How is Shirin's choice to continue to wear her hijab a form of resistance?
4. Have you ever had to choose between your own personal safety or comfort and doing what you believe in?

POWER AND PRIVILEGE

5. Describe in your own words what happened in Mr. Jordan's class that made Shirin walk out on pages 80-81. Select a quote from the text that you think best describes what hurt Shirin most from this incident. What was Mr. Jordan trying to do? What could he have done differently to accomplish his goal?
6. What makes Shirin and her brother's high school experiences so different? What are some other examples throughout the book where people (teachers, peers, parents, etc.) treat Shirin and her brother differently?
7. How does Ocean's failure to understand his own privilege or the realities of Shirin's life as a young Muslim woman put her in emotional and physical danger? What consequences do Ocean and Shirin face after coming out as a couple in their school?

HOME AND FAMILY

8. When Shirin returns home after being attacked, she smells her mother's cooking and knows she will be alright. What are the smells, sounds, tastes, or people that bring you back to yourself? That make you feel safe?
9. What makes Shirin start feeling closer to Navid again? How does she describe her relationship with her brother? How do they show love for one another throughout the book? What are the things that you do that bring you closer to the people you love?

SELF-WORTH

10. Throughout the book, Shirin describes different reasons for wearing her headscarf. How does Shirin's headscarf make her feel? What about it makes her feel powerful and in control of her own body? How is her control of her own body threatened in different ways throughout the book? In what ways do you feel that you have a right to your own body?
11. "It would be so much better to be called a b-girl, a breakdancer, than The Girl Who Wore That Thing on Her Head" (pg. 75). How does her breakdancing cause a shift in other people's perceptions of Shirin? How does it shift the way she thinks about herself? Do you feel like people judge you by what you look like or what you do?
12. What does this book teach us about strength and self-worth? How can our circumstances make us strong? How much of self-worth and strength come from our circumstances and how much comes from our own internal resolve and outlook on the world?

TRUST

13. Shirin says "Music seemed to steady me like a second skeleton; I leaned on it when my bones were too shaken to stand" (pg. 9). How do you see music play out in Shirin's life? In what ways does she lean on it throughout the book? What is it that steadies you or gives you hope when you need it?
14. When Shirin first meets Yusef, she is relieved to hear him use the word "hijabis" casually and without judgment. Why do you think Shirin feels an immediate connection to Yusef? What is something in your life that you often feel like you have to "translate" to other people? Is there anyone you don't have to "translate" with?
15. Throughout the novel, many adults behave in ways that are disappointing, harmful, or a violation of someone's trust. Identify some of these adult characters, and discuss the ways their actions cause lasting harm.