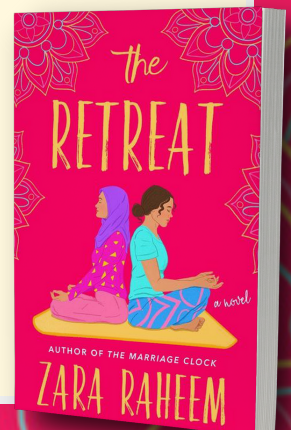


THE RETREAT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Nadia thinks that she wants 'a life centered in love and happiness and, most importantly, truth.' While it's clear during the course of the novel what Aman is hiding, what are Nadia's secrets? Who else in the novel is not being true to themselves?
- 2) What do you think are the deeper reasons that Nadia and her sister, Zeba, have had a difficult relationship?
- 3) How have Nadia and Zeba each dealt with their parents' relationship?
- 4) Discuss how the title of the novel, *The Retreat*, has many different meanings given the context of the story.
- 5) Were you surprised at Aman's revelation? Why or why not.
- 6) When Nadia and Zeba's father left, their mother retreated into silence. Discuss the ways silence has affected Nadia, Aman, Zeba. Are there times when silence is the best policy?
- 7) Near the end of the novel, Aman insists he loved Nadia and he always will, and that their marriage wasn't a sham. Do you believe all or part of this? Why or why not?
- 8) Discuss the role of food, and how it may reflect the emotions of the characters in the novel.
- 9) Were you happy with the ending?



ZARA RAHEEM Q&A



1) How long have you been writing? When and where did you start?

When I was in second grade, I came across the book “Harriet the Spy” and instantly became obsessed with not just Harriet as a character, but with the world of adolescent sleuthing which sounded so exciting, dangerous, and exhilarating to my eight-year-old self. I started carrying a notebook around and jotted down stories of things happening in my neighborhood—which wasn’t much considering I lived in a sleepy little town in the Midwest—but that was how my fascination with writing and storytelling began. Since then, I’ve always been drawn to writing in some way (through journaling, poetry, short stories, or novels), but it was especially fun to channel my “inner Harriet” when writing some of the scenes for “The Retreat”.

2) What inspired you to write this particular novel—a story of a marriage ending and new lives beginning for many of the characters?

The inspiration for this novel surprisingly began with Nadia and Zeba’s story. In past years, several people close to me have lost a parent to illness or agedness, and I’ve witnessed how the significance of that loss can impact entire families—particularly siblings. I wanted to explore how the relationship between two sisters, who had previously been close, could become fraught and distant because of such a loss. I knew there needed to be a reason to pull them together, and Aman’s affair seemed like the perfect catalyst to force them to confront past issues and rebuild their relationship.

3) How did you decide on the title? A ‘retreat’ can mean many things. How does it reflect the narrative?

I liked how this single word could take on various interpretations within the narrative. The retreat is a physical place where Nadia goes to learn more about Aman’s mistress, but it also reflects her emotional response to the different problems that arise in her life, be it her marriage, her grief surrounding her mother’s death, or her feelings of inadequacy with Zeba. Throughout the novel, we see that it’s not just Nadia who retreats from herself and others when met with unanticipated challenges; it’s a shared trait amongst many characters, and it’s interesting to see how this withdrawal deepens misunderstandings and causes strain on different relationships in the book.

ZARA RAHEEM Q&A

4) What was the most difficult part of writing this book?

I wrote “The Retreat” during the pandemic, while pregnant and then while navigating the first few months of new parenthood, so my biggest challenge was just finding the energy and motivation to write every day! Although it started off as a struggle, once I found my rhythm (it took a minute, but I did eventually find it!), being able to retreat into Nadia’s world and spend time with these characters provided an escape that I really grew to appreciate.

5) What advice would you give to aspiring authors?

Don’t wait for inspiration to begin writing. The practice of writing (if done frequently and consistently) is what will lead to inspiration. Octavia Butler says, “Forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you’re inspired or not.” You don’t have to commit hours a day to writing. If you spend just fifteen minutes but make it a part of your daily schedule—even if you don’t feel like it, even if the writing is bad, even if you have no idea where your story is going—the consistency of this habit will not only liberate you from the pressure of having to come up with something brilliant each time you write, but it’s the only way to guarantee progress and maintain momentum on whatever your writing goals are.