

Community Conversations Book Club Discussion Questions

The goal of *Community Conversations* is to connect Americans to the refugee crisis and the experiences of refugees.

The following are discussion questions to help you generate meaningful discussion at your *Community Conversations* book club. There are a few general questions that can be used with any book you choose, along with a few questions that directly relate to each of the specific books. Feel free to discuss additional questions as you see fit for your group.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Many of the characters in the *Community Conversations* books were forced to flee their homes and communities in order to save their families from danger and possible death. If you were presented with a similar situation, what three things would you take with you? Before choosing, take into consideration your ability to carry the items in addition to whether you have family members (i.e. small children, elderly) who might need extra assistance.
- On average, refugees are displaced for 17 years and in many cases have to restart their lives in a foreign land. If you transitioned to a new country, one in which your education and qualifications were not acceptable to work in that new country (i.e. lawyer, doctor, teacher credentials, language barriers, work Visa or permit denied) what would you do? Do you have certain skillsets that would allow you to explore other types of jobs as a means of survival? *(Example: If you were a doctor in Syria you might not be allowed to practice medicine in the United States. If you are a good driver and have a good sense of direction you might consider driving a taxi. If you are a people person and understand sales you might work in retail.)*
- How did reading a book about refugees make you think differently about the experiences and daily struggles of refugees around the world? What is one new thing you learned that makes you see the global refugee crisis in a different light?

FICTION

A Thousand Splendid Suns

- How would the novel be different if Aziza had been a boy and Zalmai had been a girl?
- If you were in Laila's shoes, would you stay in Murree or return to Kabul? Why?
- How does Tariq fleeing and living in a refugee camp affect his relationship with Laila?

- Does the author's depiction of a refugee camp seem realistic? Why or why not? Discuss.

A Thread of Grace

- Do you think those that fled as a result of the Nazis in World War II are refugees? Why or why not? How do you think the experiences of those who fled during World War II are similar or different to refugees fleeing today?
- People who did not live through World War II often believe they would have hidden someone like Anne Frank or helped refugees the way the Italian peasants did. Would you take that risk? What would be a similar risk that you or others might take today?

In the Sea There are Crocodiles

- All before turning fifteen years old, Enaiatollah flees through Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Greece, before he eventually seeks political asylum in Italy. Would you have done things differently than Enaiatollah? How, when, and why?
- Discuss the contrast of the childhood innocence of playing buzul-bazi and the Taliban arriving to close the school. How does the fact that this is a child's experience of brutality affect you?
- Are personal stories like Enaiatollah's more valuable than a purely historical account of the refugee crisis when understanding the realities of the crisis? Do stories like this help you to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by refugees?

Little Bee: A Novel

- Little Bee strives to learn English in order to survive in the detention center. How would you cope with living in a new country without knowing the language or cultural norms to help you survive?
- "Sad words are just another beauty. A sad story means, this storyteller is alive" (p. 9). For Little Bee and other asylum seekers, the story of their life thus far is often all they have. Are personal stories like Little Bee's more valuable than a purely historical account of the refugee crisis when understanding the realities of the crisis? Do stories like this help you to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by refugees? Why or why not?

Odyssey to the North

- Were you surprised to learn that such a large number of refugees from El Salvador live in the United States? Ongoing violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras has

affected thousands more in the last few years. What do you think you could do to shine a light on refugees coming to America from South and Central America?

- The main character deals with many challenges to assimilate to American culture while still remaining loyal to his home country and family. What are some of the ways he does this? If you were forced to flee to a foreign land, what are some of the things you would do to assimilate? What parts of your American identity would be most important for you to hold onto?

The Kite Runner

- How would you describe a refugee? Were you surprised to learn that Amir and Baba were refugees and came from wealth?
- When Amir and Baba settle in the United States, their lives are vastly different. Discuss the changes they endure and the new life they live in America vs. their lifestyle in Afghanistan.
- When Amir and Baba move to the United States their relationship changes, and Amir begins to view his father as a more complex man. Discuss the changes in their relationship. Do you see the changes in Baba as tragic or positive? Why?

What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng

- How is Valentino's life different in Atlanta than it was in his home country? What were some of the obstacles he faced when he first moved to Atlanta?
- The New York Times compared *What is the What* to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* saying both novels give us a glimpse into the experiences of a historical past-time. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* showed us what it meant to grow up in a slaveholding society and how to navigate it. *What is the What* similarly draws us closer to the experience of a refugee. How are the two stories alike and does *What is the What* succeed in bringing you closer to the experiences of refugees?
- Valentino wants everyone to hear his stories: "Written words are rare in small villages like mine, and it is my right and obligation to send my stories into the world, even if silently, even if utterly powerless" [p. 29]. Why is a personal story like Valentino's more valuable than a purely historical account? How can we help refugees like Valentino tell their stories?

NONFICTION

Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War

- Burning County provides a topical overview of the current war and the violence that is engulfing Syria. How does having a better understanding of the current situation in Syria make it easier to understand the resulting refugee crisis and why millions are fleeing their home country?
- Would you flee or stay?
- The author goes in depth on the worst refugee crisis since World War II being the byproduct of the violence in Syria. Do you see similarities between the current situation and WWII?

Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference

- Think about the city where the Fugees live – Clarkston, Georgia. Discuss the different reactions of residents as their city evolves. What makes a strong community—a strong sense of shared culture? The ability for many cultures to coexist and collaborate?
- The boys on the Fugees soccer teams have made a huge transition from their old life in various countries to their new life in America. Discuss some of the challenges they face, how you can relate to them and other similar challenges you might have faced through transitions in your own life.
- The Fugees made a great impact on the community in Clarkston, Georgia. Discuss the significance of their impact and why and how it might be important to American's deeper understanding of the refugee crisis in the United States and around the world.

The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community

- The beginning of the book starts with a "I am from" poem. The poem reflects Pipher's own perspectives and experiences on where she is from, and how she has been shaped by these experiences. What would your "I am from" poem sound like? Discuss how we can learn from each other's cultures and noticing something "different" means noticing something about yourself and your own culture.
- There are many instances where families/refugees do not quite understand American culture. Discuss the differences and obstacles that our culture presents to those coming for the first time. (Example: "State Fair," on page 41). Have you experienced similar challenges in your own life during transitions?

- After reading Phiper's book and exploring the stories of refugees coming to America, do you feel differently about welcoming refugees to America? Do you believe they should have a chance at the American dream as Phiper eloquently argues in the book?

The People Smuggler: The True Story of Ali Al Jenabi

- How is Ali's life different in Australia than it was in his home country? What were some of the obstacles he faced when he first moved to Australia?
- Ali al Jenabi's story is a powerful story. Do you think a personal story like his is more valuable than a purely historical account? Why? How can we help refugees like Ali tell their stories?

Where the Wind Leads: A Refugee Family's Miraculous Story of Loss, Rescue, and Redemption

- Chung and his family eventually land in Arkansas, where they face the challenge of learning a new culture. Discuss some of the challenges they faced and similar challenges you have faced in your own life during times of transition. How would you deal with some of these challenges in a different country?
- Chung's family sailed into the South China Sea, despite knowing that an estimated two hundred thousand people had already died at the hands of brutal pirates and violent seas attempting the same journey. How is this similar to the current crisis happening in the Mediterranean? What would conditions have to be like in your community for you to attempt such a risky journey?
- The back cover of this book calls it "a story of personal sacrifice, redemption, endurance against almost insurmountable odds, and what it truly means to be American." Discuss how this story exemplifies what it means to be an "American".

SHORT STORIES & ESSAYS

Not Born a Refugee Woman: Contesting Identities, Rethinking Practices (Studies in Forced Migration)

- The essays in *Not Born a Refugee Woman* emphasize refugee women's agency, resilience, and creativity. What were you most surprised to learn about how women's identities and roles change from their native country to their new country?
- What dangers do women face as refugees that make their experiences different from men?

- What are some of the ways that women cope with being displaced? How do you think these might differ from how men or children cope?
- What do you think we could do differently to protect women refugees?

Making It Home: Real-Life Stories from Children Forced to Flee and Give Me Shelter: Stories About Children Who Seek Asylum

- In what ways do you think your experience(s) as a child were similar to the ones you read in these stories? How were your experiences as a child different?
- The stories in these books are about children forced to flee, some who have had to leave their families behind. What are the most important things you would need to know to venture out on your own?
- Children who are forced to flee and become asylum-seekers and refugees often witness and experience many things that take their innocence away. What could we do to help children in these circumstances?

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Baseball Saved Us

- Take a moment to think about what the title of the book means. How did baseball save those who were imprisoned in the internment camps during World War II?
- How do you think Shorty felt when he swung the bat and hit the ball "out of the park"? Tell about a time when people thought you would not be able to do something and you proved them wrong. What did you do and how did you feel?
- Others teased Shorty for things about himself that he could not change or that made him different, such as his height and his cultural background. Talk about a time when others teased you for something that you could not change about yourself or something that made you different. How did it make you feel? How do you feel about the times that you or someone you know has teased someone else about something that made them different or that they could not change.

Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan

- How do you think the boys felt after being separated from their parents, families and homes? What are some of the most important things families do for us and in what ways did the boys create their own family?
- How did you feel when you learned that the book is based on a true story of boys in Sudan?
- In the book, Tom asks Garang to tell his story because it will help other refugees. How did Garang's story help others?
- What was the refugee camp like? What do you think would be difficult about living in a refugee camp, especially as a child?

Drita, My Homegirl

- How does Drita's family feel about the apartment that her father rented? How does their new home compare to their house in Kosovo? Which family member is affected the most by these changes in living conditions? How do you know? How do you think you would feel if you had to move to a new home in a new country where so much was different from what you knew?
- What was Maxie afraid to share with her friends? What does Maxie do in order to not have to share her feelings with others? Are there things that you do when you do not want to share something?
- Adults don't always see the problems faced by young people, especially when young people don't ask for help. What problems does Drita try to face by herself? Why doesn't she ask for help?
- What do Drita and Maxie have in common and do you think they will become friends? What is friendship and why is it so important in this book?

Four Feet, Two Sandals

- What is friendship? How can you be a true friend? Sometimes being a friend means having to give up something that is important to you. How do Lina and Feroza show their friendship for each other?
- Sharing does not always mean sharing a "thing". We can share music, culture, experiences and conversations. Lina and Feroza share their sandals. What else do they share with each other?

- People who flee their country and home because of fear of persecution are called refugees. The majority of refugees worldwide are children. What are some of the reasons that someone becomes a refugee? Can you give examples of why someone might become a refugee?

The Colour of Home

- What was the main difference between Hassan's old school and his new one?
- How did the children try to help Hassan at playtime? What can you do to make a new student feel welcome at your school?
- Hassan told Miss Kelly what happened when the soldiers came and why he cried. Even when he escaped from the soldiers some things still made him sad. Think about some of these. What did Hassan have to leave behind in Somalia? What did he miss the most?

SOURCES (note that we annotate the sources online, but organized them below for your reference. We made up our own questions for books not listed below)

In the Sea There are Crocodiles

https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/in_the_sea.pdf

Little Bee: A Novel

<http://chrisclleave.com/little-bee/reading-group-guide/>

Odyssey to the North

<http://www.mariobencastro.org/millar.htm>

What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/books/review/Prose.t.html?_r=2&

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/1123-what-is-the-what-eggert?start=3>

Outcasts United: An American Town, a Refugee Team, and One Woman's Quest to Make a Difference

<http://libguides.mcckc.edu/content.php?pid=448800&sid=3886061>

The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community

<https://wce.wvu.edu/nwchgee/overview-middle-everywhere>

Baseball Saved Us

<http://www.stmichaelschool.org/dyna/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/baseball-saved-us-discussion-questions.pdf>

Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan

<http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/book-of-the-month-brothers-in-hope-parent-guide.pdf>

Drita, My Homegirl

<https://www.scholastic.com/bookfairs/teachers/connections/pdf/DritaMyHomegirl.pdf>
<https://www.emporia.edu/libsv/wawbookaward/curriculumguides/dritamyhomegirl.html>

Four Feet, Two Sandals

http://www.karenlynnwilliams.com/files/sandals_guide.pdf

The Colour of Home

<http://hmd.org.uk/resources/books-for-youngs/colour-home-mary-hoffman-and-karin-littlewood>