In the Country of Men

Hisham Matar, the author of In the Country of Men, once said in an interview, “Some of the most powerful memories are those when you are very, very young. Adult life is seen through the reflection of complex, rational thought.” What is the effect of reading about the Qaddafi era in Libya from a child’s point of view? What clarity does it bring? In what ways does a child’s perspective cloud the truth?

How would you characterize Muammar al-Qaddafí’s political rhetoric as it is captured in the novel? What makes fiction an ideal format for depicting the headline-making events of Qaddafí’s rule? How does reading In the Country of Men affect the way you think about the overthrow of Qaddafí and related events in Libya?

How does Suleiman’s eventual exile to Egypt affect the story? How do you think it shapes the ways in which he remembers his childhood and his relationships with family and friends? Is it easier for him to criticize Libya from abroad?

Discuss the notion of living as an expatriate. How does Suleiman cope with the knowledge that he cannot safely go home again? How do such circumstances affect identity and sense of self?

Hisham Matar has much in common with Suleiman. Both left Libya when they were children, although, unlike Suleiman, Matar was accompanied by his parents. In 1990, Matar’s father was kidnapped while living in exile in Cairo and was returned to Libya, where he was tortured and imprisoned. He has not been heard from since 1995. How does knowing the similarities between the author and his protagonist affect the way you think about the novel?
Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood

In her introduction to Persepolis, Marjane Satrapi explains that she wrote the book to show that Iran is not just a country of “fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism.” How does Satrapi challenge this conception? How does Persepolis alter or confirm your views on Iran?

What did you learn about Iran and the Iranian Revolution from Persepolis that you might have missed in a conventional historical narrative?

How did the Iranian Revolution exert power and influence over so many people, including many educated and middle-class people such as Marji’s parents? Why do you think Marji’s parents sent her away while they stayed in Tehran? Why didn’t they leave as well?

At the core of the book is Marji’s family. What does her family value most? What is the role of women in the family, and how does Marji’s relationship with her mother and grandmother differ from her relationship with her father?

Contrast the political and ideological rebellion described in Persepolis with Marji’s personal rebellion. Notice the moments when the two seem to come together, for example, when Marji tells her mother, “You are the Guardian of the Revolution of this House!” How is Marji’s typical teenage rebellion colored by the backdrop of social oppression and political unrest?

Discuss the role and importance of religion in Persepolis. How does religion define certain characters in the book, and affect the way they interact with each other? What commentary might Satrapi be making on the role of religion in modern society and the tension between Western culture and fundamentalist Islam? Persepolis has been occasionally criticized for approaching religious fundamentalism from a biased Western perspective. Why do you think it has received such criticism?
**Broken Verses**

References to language appear throughout *Broken Verses*. In this novel, language is understood as the key to expression and change—“a living, dangerous entity.” Whether it’s the secret code between The Poet and Samani, the power of theater, Shakespeare’s language, or even Aasmaani’s questions for the quiz show, language often needs to be deciphered or translated. Toward the end of the novel, Aasmaani explains that The Poet was always trying to “force tyranny to defend itself with language.” What does that mean?

When Aasmaani’s mother debates the religious leader, they argue over the meaning of Qur’anic verses about women’s “coverings,” the unity of the larger Islamic community (the *Umma*), Afghanistan’s religiously based struggle against the Soviet Union, and the place of religion in politics. How are all these issues connected in their arguments? How do you see the role of religion in all these different spheres?

Poetry plays a crucial role in *Broken Verses*, as it does in Pakistani culture. The Poet is named National Poet of Pakistan, his new verses are eagerly awaited by readers, and his death is noted with a national day of mourning. Does the author of *Broken Verses*, Kamila Shamsie, explain why poetry enjoys such a powerful, political place in Pakistan?

Aasmaani traced her disillusionment with politics to August 17, 1988, when the president of Pakistan, Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, was killed in a mysterious plane crash. She even scorns her mother’s political commitment, saying, “All those noble means of resisting came to nothing.” By the end of the novel, do you think she still feels that way about her mother’s involvement in politics and her own political commitments? In light of Pakistan’s turbulent history, can you understand why Aasmaani would feel this way?

Throughout the novel, Aasmaani seems fixated on Pakistan’s past and on her own history. Does this prevent her from moving forward in the present, or does the Pakistani past offer an example that she can draw on as she moves forward?
House of Stone: A Memoir of Home, Family, and a Lost Middle East

Early in the process of rebuilding his family’s ancestral home, Anthony Shadid is told, “This house belongs to so many people. It’s not yours.” Who does the house “belong” to, and why are so many people in the town of Marjayoun skeptical about Shadid’s project? Why does he find it important to rebuild the home? Does Shadid address the townspeople’s skepticism?

Shadid describes Marjayoun as a town “displaced by borders, reduced by time.” What might he mean by this statement? What role does the town play in the book?

Shadid often writes nostalgically about the loss of the cosmopolitan culture of the Ottoman Empire. How is that reflected in Marjayoun’s culture and life? And how does this romantic depiction resonate in the region today?

“Years cannot undo centuries. It takes generations to weaken what has been.” Reflect on these words and what they mean both in the context of Shadid’s struggle to rebuild the house and in the context of the tumultuous history of Marjayoun.

Throughout the book, Shadid describes the diverse origins of the architectural styles and building materials used for the house. How is the house’s physical appearance symbolic of both Shadid and Lebanon?

Shadid describes the way he speaks as “Arabic with an Oklahoman accent.” How do linguistic and cultural differences affect his experience? How does his American upbringing shape the way his family and friends in Lebanon treat him, and the assumptions they have about his life and his motivations for rebuilding the house?

Shadid died shortly before House of Stone was published. Does knowing about his death change the way you reflect on the book? If you were to write an afterward connecting his death with the themes in the book, what would you say?
Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood

Hudud, or the “sacred frontier,” is defined by Fatima Mernissi’s father as necessary because “harmony exists when each group respects the prescribed limit of the other; trespassing leads only to sorrow and unhappiness.” Given this dictum, why do some women in the book dream of trespassing this frontier?

How does Mernissi define a domestic harem, as opposed to an imperial one? What are the possible political and social dimensions of secluding women in domestic harems?

What do you make of the different stories offered by women in Dreams of Trespass to explain the existence of harems?

What are some of the differences in the lifestyles in the harem of Mernissi’s rural family and the one in which she lives in Fez? Why do these differences exist?

At one point in the book, the young Mernissi learns that Jews in Germany have to wear a yellow star to distinguish them from other Germans. Describe the observations she makes in drawing a parallel between the yellow star and her own situation as a woman in Morocco.

A heroine from The Arabian Nights, Princess Burdur, inspires women to “turn the world upside down” when their situation is hopeless. How does the story of this character relate to Mernissi’s life, and how does it inspire her?

How does Mernissi illustrate the importance of women’s solidarity? How does she relate this ideal to tradition?