



Across Cultures and Continents Discussion Questions



"Across Cultures and Continents" theme materials created for Let's Talk About It by Ron McFarland, University of Idaho, 2007.

Discussion Questions for Series

1. What universal aspects of being human do you encounter in these books? That is, if you were to proceed from the premise that all humans have more in common than not, what particulars would you emphasize? To what extent are the basic needs (food, clothing, shelter) a problem in these books? What other issues are involved (love, loss, loyalty, fear, courage, joy, sorrow)?
2. What do you encounter in these books that seems specific to the particular culture or place? Does the author focus on exotic elements? Where and how does he or she impart most effectively the sense of place and the social or cultural values? Do you find the difference to be engaging (attractive) or alienating? Reflect on some time in your life when you have felt like an outsider, a foreigner.
3. Most of the writers in this series, sometimes for obvious reasons, no longer reside in the country of their origin, but even those who appear to be relieved to have escaped their homeland usually express nostalgia over what they have left behind. Where do you see evidence of this? Which of the countries you encounter in this series do you think you would most like to visit? If a "given" of this question were to be that your security would be assured, would that make a difference?
4. Perhaps more frequently than in writing from the United States (generally, that is) these authors tend to focus on class difference and class conflict. Where do you see examples of this in these books? How important are such elements as opposed to more personal kinds of conflict (that is, it's not upper vs. lower class, but this kind of guy vs. that kind of guy)? Sociologists might argue that in the U.S. we are less aware of this sort of tension or strife because the middle class is so large and well established. Reflect on this premise. Does the middle class appear to be gaining, or losing, ground in the U.S.? Can we (and should we) attempt to promote our middle class values in other countries? If we do that, should our most essential tool be democracy or capitalism, or are they inextricably conjoined?
5. To what extent do the writers indicate possible solutions to the numerous and often complex problems we encounter in their books? That is, do the writers see their role primarily to be one of pointing out and dramatizing the dilemmas of their cultures, and if so, is that enough? In

other words, what do you think should be the role (responsibility, perhaps) of a writer like the Nigerian Chris Abani or the Indian Thrity Umrigar, particularly if you accept the premise that they will be read mostly by those from outside their culture (that is, by Westerners)?