**Discussion Questions**

The American Voices theme has been developed with specific discussion questions for each of the available reading selections. These questions have been provided to encourage a deeper discussion among participants and to provide general guidance and direction. Facilitators and participants are encouraged to research, prepare, and engage with additional questions for their specific needs.

**Unaccustomed Earth**

1. Discuss the relevance of the epigraph from Hawthorne’s “The Custom House” not just to the title story but also to the collection as a whole. In which stories do the children successfully “strike their roots into unaccustomed earth”? Why do others find themselves unable to establish roots? How do their feelings of restlessness and insecurity stem from growing up in two cultures? What other more universal problems do they experience? In what ways does their lack of attachment to a place or culture reflect a more general trend in society?
2. Why does Paul, the American graduate student in “Nobody’s Business,” find his roommate, Sang, the recipient of frequent marriage proposals, so intriguing? Does Paul really want to help Sang, or does he get involved in her relationship with Farouk for more selfish reasons? Why do you think Lahiri titled this story “Nobody’s Business”–and what does the title mean to you?
3. In an interview with Bookforum, Lahiri, whose parents immigrated to London and then to the United States, said, “My parents befriended people simply for the fact that they were like them on the surface; they were Bengali, and that made their circle incredibly vast. There is this de facto assumption that they’re going to get along, and often that cultural glue holds them, but there were also these vast differences. My own circle of friends is much more homogenous, because most of my friends went to college–Ivy League or some other fine institution–and vote a certain way.” How is this mirrored by the friendship between the two sets of parents in “Once in a Lifetime,” who are close friends despite the differences in their backgrounds? Why does this attachment deteriorate when the Choudhuri family returns from India? Which of their habits or attitudes do Hema’s parents find particularly reprehensible and why? What is the significance of Kaushik’s breaking his family’s silence and telling Hema about his mother’s illness?
4. How do “Once in a Lifetime” and “Year’s End” set the stage for “Going Ashore,” the final story in the trilogy? What traces of their younger selves are visible in both Hema and Kaushik? In what ways do the paths they’ve chosen reflect or oppose the journeys their parents made as immigrants?
5. The stories in Unaccustomed Earth offer a moving, highly original perspective on the clash between family and cultural traditions and the search for individual identity. How does the sense of displacement felt by the older, immigrant generation affect their American-born children? What accommodations do the children make to their parents’ way of life? In trying to fit in with their American friends, do they sacrifice their connections to their heritage? In what ways are the challenges they face more complex than those of their parents?
6. Several stories feature— interracial and intercultural marriages. What characteristics do these mixed marriages share? In what ways does becoming parents themselves bring up (or renew) questions about cultural identity? What emotions arise as they contemplate the differences between the families they’re creating and those in which they grew up?

**A Woman Is No Man**

1. Which of the women in the novel do you sympathize with most? Why? Are there any characters that you don’t feel are deserving of sympathy?
2. The novel jumps back and forth in time in each chapter to share key events. Why do you think Rum chose this approach? How effective was it for you as a reader?
3. Why might a community or culture have a “code of silence”? What are the potential risks of such secrecy? In what ways is such silence harmful to Isra and other women and girls?
4. What might it mean for a person to have a voice? Why is it important to health and safety? What are the various forces that silence Isra’s voice?
5. Why are books so important to Isra, Sarah, and Deya? What makes the reading of books so threatening to Isra’s mother, Fareeda and the men in the novel?
6. In the frustrated words of Isra’s mother, “What does love have to do with marriage?” What are the benefits of arranged marriages in the novel? What are the costs?
7. Isra is taught from an early age that, “Obedience [is] the only path to love.” What does this mean? Why is obedience important in a society? When might obedience become oppressive or dangerous?
8. When Isra first meets Adam, he vehemently claims: “I am free.” To what extent is this true? What forces limit personal freedom? What is a healthy balance of personal freedom and obligation to family or community?
9. Why does Fareeda believe that, “Preserving our culture is what’s most important,” despite the suffering it brings to the women and girls in the family? What, more specifically, does she believe must be preserved?
10. In what different ways do Isra, Deya, Sarah, Adam, Fareeda, and Khaled assimilate to American culture? Which acts of assimilation from their children and grandchildren are acceptable to Khaled and Fareeda? Which are not? What does this reveal about their values?
11. Isra suffers profound shame for giving birth to only girls. Why are girls and women thought to be of such little value in her family and culture? What vast effects do these ideas have on girls as they grow up? What can be done to resist such psychological and physical harm?
12. Of what value is Isra’s writing of letters to her mother that she never sends?

**American Born Chinese**

1. What do the three different stories in the novel have to do with each other? Why do you think Yang presents them separately at first instead of creating one combined story?
2. How does the Monkey King character compare to other mythical characters you are familiar with? What is the effect of combining this supernatural creature with the more realistic characters in the other stories?
3. Why does Danny dread the visit of his Chinese cousin Chin-Kee so much? Is his anxiety based on his own relationship with his cousin or his concern about how others will react? What does Chin-Kee seem to represent?
4. Why does Jin have so much trouble accepting who he is? What forces in his life make that acceptance easier or more difficult?
5. How does the graphic novel format affect your experience reading these intertwined stories? How would the book be different if it were in a more traditional novel format?
6. The Monkey King chooses to be stuck in the mountain of rocks for 500 years; to escape he must return to his "true form." How do the other characters experience this return to their “true form” in the novel? Have you experienced a similar situation in your life?

**Braiding Sweetgrass**

1. Kimmerer uses a story about strawberries to introduce the reader to the notion of the “gift economy.” What are the pros and cons of the gift economy? Is Kimmerer’s view of the gift economy compatible with a mainstream American lifestyle?
2. Kimmerer uses short stories to explain her relationship with the land and the many gifts it provides. Is this an effective way to help non-Potawatomi readers to understand the way she views the world?
3. Kimmerer explains how things in nature can be animate and inanimate (animate - living; inanimate - not living). What was your reaction to this viewpoint that everything is alive? Does it change your opinion on the role plants play in our everyday lives?
4. Native American languages play many roles in literature: e.g., language representing the old world, not translating to force the reader to learn more about the tribe at hand, etc. Kimmerer brings a new perspective to this - that English is a noun-based language and Potawatomi is a verb-based language. How does this concept play a role in explaining the concepts Kimmerer is trying to convey?
5. A major theme throughout the book is reciprocity - that humans, the land, and environment depend on each other - and this relationship is sacred. How does Kimmerer successfully explain this relationship to the reader? What do you wish she had explained further? What aspects of your life embrace this theme?
6. Kimmerer touches on the concept of a gift economy and reciprocity. The U.S. is firmly rooted in capitalism, which is intertwined with a scarcity mindset. How might we go about moving closer to a gift economy on a larger scale? What might be the pros and cons of this mindset?
7. Are there practical insights and wisdom you will take from this book and incorporate into your everyday life? Do you already practice some?
8. Kimmerer discusses in "Three Sisters" how individuality is important in her culture. Does this conflict with the understanding of American individualism as problematic? Why or why not? Can we be distinctive, sovereign individuals while also honoring interconnectedness?

**The Refugees**

1. Nguyen dedicates this book, “For all refugees, everywhere.” What are the different ways in which the characters in these stories are refugees? How does their identity as refugees affect them?
2. In many of the stories, characters deal with ghosts from the past, both literal and figurative. What roles do these ghosts play in helping the characters deal with their past experiences?
3. What is the significance of the title “Black-Eyed Women”? Who are the “black-eyed women”?
4. When the narrator of “Black-Eyed Woman” wishes she died instead of her brother, he replies, “You died, too. You just don’t know it.” What does he mean?
5. In “The Other Man,” when Liem talks about not telling his parents he loved them, Marcus tells him, “that’s all in the past…The best way you can help them now is by helping yourself.” Liem thinks this is a very American attitude. Do you agree? What are the costs and benefits of this way of thinking?
6. At the end of “The Other Man,” Liem stands at the window and wonders if the world is watching him. What do you think this means?
7. In “The War Years,” why does the narrator’s perspective on Mrs. Hoa shift so dramatically? Is his mother right to support the neighbor’s cause?
8. In “I’d Love You to Want Me,” why is the main character known only as “Mrs. Kahn”? What do Mrs. Kahn’s memories about her escape reveal about her? How is Mrs. Kahn a refugee?
9. In “The Americans,” why is Carver so angry? What is he losing? Does his realization at the end alleviate his anger?
10. In the story “Fatherland,” why does Vivien misrepresent herself? How does her deception compare with Mrs. Kahn from “I’d Love You to Want Me” or Marcus from “The Other Man”?
11. What is the purpose of Phuong’s father naming his Vietnamese children after his American children? What does it mean to be a replacement Vietnamese child?
12. What common themes do you see in these different stories? Is there an overarching message that the book communicates about American life or the refugee experience?

**The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek**

1. The Kentucky Pack Horse program was implemented in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create women’s work programs and to assist economic recovery and build literacy. How did the program affect the people in this remote area in the novel?
2. Why do you think Cussy’s father marries her off to an abusive man? How is marriage in both positive and negative ways portrayed throughout the novel?
3. When Cussy receives the cure for her blueness from Doc, she realizes there’s a price to pay for her white skin, and the side effects soon become too much to handle. If you were in Cussy’s shoes, would you sacrifice your health for a chance at "normalcy"? If there weren’t any side effects, do you think Cussy would have continued to take the medication? Would you?
4. Why is Cussy still ostracized at the Independence Day celebration, despite her change of skin color? What makes racial prejudices like this so deeply entrenched?
5. Cussy has to deal with the loss of many loved ones in a very short amount of time. How do you think she handles her grief? Which loss was the most difficult for you to read?
6. What do you think life was like for the people of Troublesome? What are some of the highlights of living in such a remote place? What are some of the challenges the people on Cussy’s library route face?
7. What do you think happens to Cussy, Jackson, Honey, and the other inhabitants of Troublesome after the story ends? How do you think Cussy Mary feels about leaving Troublesome?

**Bless Me Ultima**

1. What impact does the child-narrator have on the novel?
2. Antonio is a very intelligent, sensitive youngster. Why is it necessary that he be especially sensitive?
3. Discuss the major conflicts that Antonio feels in the novel. Where do they come from? Are they resolved? Do his conflicts relate to ones that you experienced while growing up in your culture?
4. There are several regional myths incorporated into the novel. What are they? Why are they used?
5. The novel has been criticized by some who feel that certain parts are too contrived. Discuss the statement, “The dream sequences of *Bless Me, Ultima* are too logical (for dreams) and hence detract from the novel.”
6. What positive humanistic values do you see in this “Hispano” culture that are weaker or absent in your own culture?
7. What role does Ultima perform? Give specific examples.
8. What is uniquely Mexican-American about Antonio’s childhood? How is it similar to yours?
9. This is a fairly serious novel, yet there are various elements of humor present. What are they and what do they contribute to Antonio’s life and to the novel?
10. The motif of “loss of innocence” is present in most novels that deal with coming of age. Is it present here? If you agree, how does Antonio lose his youthful innocence?
11. How does this novel contribute to our understanding of the history of this region, or of the history of the United States?

**Ceremony**

1. Readers sometimes find the reading of *Ceremony* a disorienting experience, in part because Silko frequently shifts scenes and time frames without warning. How does this technique help the reader to participate in Tayo’s thoughts, emotions, and experiences? Is its influence on the narrative consistently the same, and is it always effective?
2. How does Tayo’s status as a half-breed influence his choices, his thinking, and the way he is perceived by other characters in the novel? What tensions and conflicts does his mixed ancestry contribute to Silko’s story?
3. For what reasons do Tayo and his cousin Rocky join the Army? In what ways do they and the other young Native American men benefit from their armed service, and why do these benefits evaporate once the war is over?
4. *Ceremony* has been described as a story of struggle between two cosmic forces, one basically masculine and one essentially feminine. Assuming this to be true, what are the images of masculinity and femininity that Silko presents? Is this gendered analysis an adequate way of understanding the novel? Are there important ideas that it leaves out?
5. *Ceremony* offers the suggestion that the European settlers of America were created by the “witchery” of a nameless witch doctor. What is the effect of this assertion? Does it make white people demonic by intimating that they are agents of evil, incapable of doing good? Or, to the contrary, does it somehow absolve them from blame because they are merely tools of the “Destroyers” and are not really responsible for their actions?
6. How do the poems and legends that are interspersed in Silko’s text influence your reading of the novel? Why do you think Silko centers Emo’s tale of debauchery (pp. 57–59) on the page in the same way that she centers the older, sacred stories?
7. One aspect of white culture that Tayo especially resents is the way in which its educational practices, particularly instruction in the sciences, dismiss Native beliefs as “superstitions.” What are the similarities and differences between the way Tayo feels about the treatment of his ancestral beliefs and the way in which a believer in the creation stories of Genesis might respond to Darwinism? To what extent is the novel a story of the struggle between technology and belief?
8. Blindness and invisibility are recurring motifs in *Ceremony*. What does Silko suggest through her repeated uses of inabilities or refusals to see?
9. Silko, who has suffered from headaches, depression, and nausea similar to those that plague Tayo in her novel, has said, “I wrote this novel to save my life.” How is *Ceremony* a novel of salvation, for Tayo, for its author, and for its readers? What are the limits to the salvation that it appears to offer?

**Love Medicine**

1. *Love Medicine* does not have one central protagonist. It could be argued that Marie Kashpaw and Lulu Lamartine, as matriarchs of their respective families, share the role of “main character.” The two women are brought closer through their decades-long fight over Nector Kashpaw. Is one of these women more sympathetic to the reader than the other? Why or why not?
2. Nector and Eli Kashpaw are brothers and members of the eldest generation in the novel. Nector is an educated family man, while Eli is quieter and more reclusive. In what ways are the brothers alike? In what other ways do they differ?
3. What important events are told and retold from more than one character’s point of view? How do these retellings shape the reader’s understanding of the events?
4. June Kashpaw appears as a character in the novel only in its opening pages, but the other characters remember her and speak of her frequently. Why is June Kashpaw so important to Marie Kashpaw? Why does Lipsha Morrissey care about June?
5. As a young girl, Marie Kashpaw is terrorized by Sister Leopolda in the Sacred Heart Convent. Why does Marie decide to visit Leopolda at the convent so many years later, taking her daughter Zelda with her?
6. This novel is steeped with death and loss, yet there are also comic moments throughout. How do these events relieve tension within the novel?
7. How does Native American culture clash with mainstream American culture throughout *Love Medicine*? Describe some of the recurring conflicts in the novel, and how the characters react to or retreat from them.
8. Is Lulu Lamartine a good person? How and why do her values differ from the other characters in the novel? Is she a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
9. Lipsha Morrissey and Lyman Lamartine, although close in age, are opposites in many ways. How does the reader react to these two very different characters? How do they represent the options available to modern Native Americans?
10. As a novel-in-stories, *Love Medicine* does not have a traditional, linear plot. Does the novel have a climax? Does it have more than one? Why or why not?

**My Grandmother Smoked Cigars**

1. In your opinion, what is the author’s overall purpose in writing these stories? A few possibilities: To preserve a family of popular history; capture and preserve local color; entertainment; to show a world not too different from our own; to preserve in writing what the mind so readily forgets.
2. What makes Ulibarri’s storytelling style memorable? Why do we remember the characters and their activities long after we have read the work?
3. Is there anything unique about the author’s use of vocabulary and word selection? In what ways does Spanish word use affect these works?
4. Why would he choose the story of the grandmother and her eccentricities and peculiarities for the title story?
5. What is human about these stories, and how does the author achieve that descriptive quality in his writing?
6. Why is it important to remember that the works are set in a specific environment, i.e. New Mexico, Terra Amarilla, Las Nutrias, Rio Arriba County?
7. What themes become apparent in the book? Indomitable spirit; the battle between the sexes; loss of innocence; rites of passage; initiation; the clash between cultures; religion vs. secularism; understanding the land and nature as a means of understanding the people?
8. How does the author view his own characters; are they sympathetically drawn?
9. What comment is the author making about the qualities of independence, honestly, thriftiness, being genuine, religious faith, etc.?
10. To some degree, several of the stories seem to be counterpoised (almost opposites), while others seem to reinforce messages. What could be said of the relationship between: husband and wife in *My Grandmother Smoked Cigars, La Kasa KK,* and *He Went for Nails, Witcheries or Tomfooleries?* and *The Penitentes; My Uncle Cirilo* and *Elacio Was Elacio?*
11. Why is Mano Fashico different from every other story in the volume? What could be the origins of these episodes?
12. What is unique about the cultural perspective in the story *El negro Aguilar*? What role does race play in the interpersonal relationships in the region? Is “El Negro Aguilar” black or Hispanic, or does that matter? Why?
13. Is there a distinction made between religious faith, the Church leadership and the membership, superstition and/or witchcraft? Is there something traditional about the way those relationships are handled in the Hispano community?
14. What role does Mother Nature play in the day-to-day occurrences of rural life, and what should be the person’s attitude about nature? Please consider the story *El Apache* as a point of reference.
15. Are there differences and/or similarities between these stories and the works of other Chicano writers that you have read? What differences/similarities? Why do you think they exist?

**The Joy Luck Club**

1. Although the women in The Joy Luck Club are Chinese or Chinese American, and their heritage plays an important part in their lives, they also have experiences that all of us face, regardless of culture, even today. Which of their experiences seem universal, and which are specific to their culture, in your opinion?
2. When Jing-mei’s aunties tell her about her sisters, they insist that she travel to China to see them, to tell them about their mother. They are taken aback when Jing-mei responds. “What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don’t know anything. She was my mother” (p. 36). To what extent do you think that Jing-mei is right? How well do any of the mothers and daughters know each other in this book?
3. Each of the women faces difficult choices when it comes to marrying. How are the daughters’ romantic choices influenced, if at all, by their mothers, who had fewer choices of their own?
4. When she is young, Waverly Jong is a chess prodigy. It is a common conception in the United States that young Asian children are more driven than their peers and more likely to excel because their parents demand more of them. However, it is Waverly’s mother who influences Waverly to quit chess, due to a hurtful argument. What do you think of mother and daughter’s reactions to this event? How do other parts of the novel challenge American stereotypes of Chinese culture?
5. While Waverly was a prodigy and grew up to be successful in her career, Jing-mei (or “June” as she is called in America) has had more difficulty. What does the dinner scene between Waverly and June say about each of their characters? How is their behavior influenced by family and culture?
6. The title of the book is taken from Suyuan Woo’s establishment of a gathering between women, first in China, and later in San Francisco. What do you think is the significance of these meetings to the women who attend them? Why do you think these four families have continued to come together like this after so much time has passed?
7. In Rose Hsu Jordan’s story, “Half and Half,” a terrible tragedy befalls her youngest brother Bing while she is watching him. Later Rose says,“I think about Bing, about how I knew he was in danger, how I let it happen. I think about my marriage, how I had seen the signs, I really had. But I just let it happen. And I think now that fate is shaped half by faith, half by inattention.” What does she mean by this? Do you agree with her? Do you think that Rose’s mother, An-mei, truly lost her faith that day?
8. Suyuan Woo is the only member of the Joy Luck Club who does not have her own voice in this book—she died a few months before the story begins. Why do you think the author made that choice? Why is it significant that her daughter is the main narrator, and that it is the story of her lost daughters in Kweilin that serve as a beginning and end to the book?
9. When Jing-mei visits China with her father toward the end of the book, she is constantly struck by the signs of capitalism everywhere. What do you think she was expecting when she made the trip? Have you ever visited a foreign place and found it to be very different from what you had imagined?
10. What are your thoughts on the structure of The Joy Luck Club? It is not a traditional novel told by one narrator, but the stories are very intricately connected. How did that affect your reading experience? What were some of the differences you noticed in the way that you read this book as opposed to other novels or collections of stories?

**The Women of Brewster Place**

1. Throughout the novel, Brewster Place is personified as a character itself. Is the street a protagonist or an antagonist? What effect does this have on the impact of the story and on its outcome?
2. What experiences and characteristics do the seven women characters of Brewster Place have in common? How are they different from one another? In what specific and general ways do the women support and comfort one another?
3. How solid is the logic in Butch’s philosophy that life is like eating sugar cane: “You gotta know when to stop chewing...”? What are the advantages of that philosophy? What are the weaknesses of it?
4. Mattie’s son Basil doesn’t stay long enough to go on trial. If he had, what do you expect would have been the outcome of that trial?
5. Most of the women in this novel are mistreated by men, both emotionally and physically. Why do you suppose these men treat these women this way? In what ways do women mistreat men in this novel? Are there any positive relationships between men and women in the book? In the most violent chapter of the book, Lorraine is raped repeatedly. Why, then, does she kill poor old Ben?
6. At the end of the book, Kiswana and some of the others hope that their block party will be successful and that their Block Association will benefit from some significant changes. What do you expect are their chances for success? On what evidence do you base your opinion?
7. Using the Langston Hughes poem at the front of the book, discuss which (if any) characters in the novel exhibit the characteristics he describes. Who dries up? Who festers? Who becomes syrupy sweet? Who sags? Who explodes?
8. Some readers feel that this novel, like many novels about the experiences of poor black people, is depressing and demoralizing. Others feel that its effect is uplifting and inspiring. What do you think?
9. As the book begins, we are told how Brewster Place had been born. Throughout the story, the street lives through the existence of its residents. In the end it is dying. What causes its demise? In what ways will it never die? Would it be better off dead?
10. Dreams and memories contribute much to the substance of this book as well as to its structure. In what ways is this a useful writing device? How might it confuse some readers? What is the significance of Mattie’s dream at the end of the book?

**Their Eyes Were Watching God**

1. Early in the novel, Janie experiences a moment of awakening while lying under a pear tree. Versions of that pear tree image form an important motif in the novel. What does the image mean? What uses does Hurston make of the image in other parts of the novel?
2. Hurston incorporates a number of folk tales into *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. What function does this folk material serve in the novel?
3. The novel presents and tests at least three different understandings of marriage. Explain these different understandings. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each?
4. One critic has argued that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has an “awkward” structure because Janie is forced to narrate to Phoebe events with which Phoebe must already be familiar. Is the structure of the novel a problem? What positive purpose does Janie’s narrating events with which Phoebe must already be familiar serve in the novel?
5. How does the language of the narrator reflect a growing sense of intimacy with Janie?
6. Janie’s ability to become a full participant in black folk culture makes it possible for her to find the freedom she seeks. In what ways does the folk culture help Janie succeed in her search?
7. Hurston’s novel fails to confront explicitly the problem of black/white relations. Yet Hurston dramatizes the many ways in which racial tensions surface within the black community. What evidence of this racial tension do you find? What were the reasons for these tensions? How does Hurston’s treatment of prejudices among blacks contribute to the theme of the novel? In what ways do white/black relations enter the novel?
8. Alice Walker has observed that one of Hurston’s most attractive features is her “racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings.” From your reading of this novel, how do you understand Hurston’s attitude toward race?
9. For some years now, this novel has been growing in popularity. What features of the work, in your opinion, have made this novel an enduring classic? What about the novel makes it appeal to readers today?

**Woman Hollering Creek**

1. The young girl in the story “Eleven” feels confused and overwhelmed. Why is she so troubled on her birthday?
2. How do the “gringo” tourists end up being outsmarted by several small Chicano children who are just being themselves?
3. “One Holy Night” sounds like a Christmas story, but it turns out to be rather a tragic one. Does this girl remind you of many youths in our schools? How do young girls fall into this behavior pattern?
4. Cleofilas in the story “Woman Holler…” is a rather silly dreamer. Is she typical? What lessons does she learn?
5. What’s wrong with marrying a Mexican, if this is your family heritage? Why would a mother advise her daughters this way?
6. Do girls who marry outside of their Latino culture do better in life? How did the teacher/artist in the story “Never Marry a Mexican” end up?
7. Are there any good strong men in the lives of all the women characters in Cisneros’ book?
8. What curious traditional customs does Cisneros throw into her stories? Did any of them remind you of your own customs or those of the older generation?
9. Are there some adult female characters in these stories that you feel good about? Why? Does it take a female writer to really create such characters?