



## Discussion Questions

The Connecting Generations 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.

### Charlotte's Web

1. In order to enjoy this story, one must be able to enter into a realm of imagination and play. How successful were you in making that transition?
2. What are the highlights in terms of humor in the story?
3. Do you think there is meant to be any profound symbolism in the image of the web itself? What is it?
4. When were you first made aware of the life of farm animals? Did you ever care for animals who were in danger of ending up on the dinner table?
5. Recent research has found evidence that animals have what might be called “emotions.” Is this a statement you agree or disagree with?
6. Do you think this story is helpful for children dealing with death?
7. Is Wilbur the embodiment of Everyman to some extent? He feels the need for friendship and also faces the stark reality of death, untimely death actually, and he feels very insecure as a consequence. How do you regard the characterization (personification) of Wilbur?
8. *Charlotte's Web* has been called “a fable for adults as well as children.” What do you make of this statement?
9. If you were to recommend this story to an adult, what would you say about it?



## Homegoing

1. The book's title—*Homegoing*—refers to the African-American traditional belief that the soul of an enslaved person returns to Africa after death. How is “home” defined by the characters in the novel? What factors influence their sense of belonging to a family, a town, or a country?
2. Some of the characters in *Homegoing* decide to go along with the status quo, and others make significant sacrifices to stand up for what they believe in. How do they make these decisions and what does the novel seem to say about which choice is best?
3. What does Akosua Mensah mean when she tells James, “I will be my own nation” (99)? What role do patriotism, heritage, and tradition play in contributing to the injustices, prejudices, and violence depicted in the book? Which other characters seem to share Akosua’s point of view?
4. The novel speaks of a curse that follows the family members through the generations and influences not only their lives, but the lives of those around them. Akua explains, “sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your home.” How do the characters deal with the trauma they have inherited? How do they learn to heal from that trauma and its effects?
5. The novel is structured as a series of separate stories, each centered around a major character. What is the effect of this structure on the overall message of the novel? How do the separate chapters work together and against each other? How might this structure of individual but connected stories be a metaphor for the individual and collective aspects of living in a larger society?

## Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age

6. The author begins the Introduction by recalling how little she knew or thought about being middle-aged when she was a teen. How typical is this? Why would adulthood be so hard to imagine when teens are surrounded by grown-ups? Could teens improve their chances of future happiness and success by giving more thought to being middle-aged? Is this likely to happen?



7. "The Worst Christmas" turns out not to be so bad after all, despite the sense of dread and loneliness that precede it. Childhood memories clash with recent uncertainties and disappointments, yet in the end, on the observation level of a train bound for Oregon, past, present, and future come together in a satisfying flash of acceptance and understanding. How? Why? What has happened? What has changed?
8. Eating alone, a solitary meal in an expensive restaurant -- is this a pleasure best savored in middle age? Would a teenager or a septuagenarian be able to derive as much satisfaction and enjoyment from such a meal? Why? Or why not?
9. Many of these essays contrast the traditions and values of the author's Eastern childhood with the culture and lifestyle she has found in Idaho as an adult. What is it about life here that she finds so appealing and compelling?
10. "College Choir" recounts an unexpected lesson learned that had less to do with music than with sorting out priorities and making choices. How does this relate to making a successful passage from childhood to adulthood? How does it relate to teaching?
11. In "My Father's Work," Swetnam speaks of her father's reinvention of himself, and of her own reinvention of herself in her twenties and early thirties. What does this mean? Is it possible to reinvent oneself? Is it more likely at some stages of life than at others? How does this concept of reinvention help her to reconnect with her father?
12. "Orion" begins with an attempt to climb King Lear Peak and moves on to a reflection on the aging process, the relentless pressure of time upon us all, the changes in our minds and bodies, our priorities and goals as the years unfold. What evidence do you see of such changes in your own life and in the lives of your friends and family?

## The Honey Bus

1. Meredith sees her own fractured relationship with her mother mirrored in the troubled history between her mom and grandmother. How does their example influence the path she chooses for her own life?



2. 2. The bees offer Meredith examples of communities that sometimes thrive and sometimes fall apart. What do the bees teach her about what it takes to be part of a successful community?
3. 3. One theme that emerges from the book is the relationship between humans and nature, specifically the impact that humans can have on the environment they live in. What examples of living responsibly in nature does the book offer? What connection does responsibility to nature have with responsibility to the human world?
4. 4. How do Meredith's brother, mother, father, grandmother, and step-grandfather teach her different ways of engaging with the world? What lessons does she learn from each of them about how she might choose to interact with others in society?
5. 5. The care and attention that bees need to survive can be seen as a metaphor for the care and attention that children need. In both cases, the book shows positive and negative examples of how those needs might or might not be met. How does caring for bees teach Meredith how to be a responsible and engaged citizen?

## I am the Cheese

1. Science fiction or reality? This novel was published in 1977. In what ways is it both a product of its time and a harbinger of things to come?
2. What is this novel about? Consider each perspective described below. Which, in your view, describes the book best?
3. The individual is ignorant of and at the mercy of a governmental bureaucracy that is big and mysterious. Citizens have become disenfranchised; democracy is an illusion.
4. Adam's plight symbolizes the state of contemporary adolescence, involving a search for identity in a hostile, uncaring world.
5. The novel is a chronicle of an adolescent's mental breakdown. Adam's narrative reveals that he is paranoid, claustrophobic. Can we trust him as a narrator?
6. How many of you read I Am the Cheese as adolescents?



7. If this is the first time you read *I Am the Cheese*, what is your reaction to the ending? How would reading this book for the second time change the experience?
8. What are your thoughts on the format of the book? How does the format help the story unfold?
9. What clues does the author give the reader that things are not quite as they seem?
10. How does the author portray people in authority and the role of the government?
11. Who does Adam meet along his journey? What might each person represent to an adolescent?
12. How is Amy portrayed? How is she different from Adam?
13. How is Adam's mother portrayed? How is her reaction to witness protection different from her husband's?
14. Why might this book be on "censored" lists in some communities and schools? What might be considered objectionable?
15. Has Adam suffered a mental breakdown or is his condition medically-induced?
16. How does the author use "The Farmer in the Dell" to advance the story?

## Jackalope Dreams

17. In what ways does this novel seem to "talk back" to the mythical West and the genre Western? For example, do guns and gunplay, horses and horseback rides, private property, and the outdoors appear in expected places and ways?
18. Owen Wister's 1902 novel *The Virginian* is credited with inaugurating the cowboy western and a number of western themes and conventions. Among the features of Wister's novel is a cinematic eye that surveys and admires the rugged beauty of both the hero and the landscape. When we first see Wister's Virginian, he moves "with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin." How does Blew's introduction of the body of her heroine depart from Wister's introduction of *The Virginian*, or the countless films that have eyed their Gary Coopers and Clint



Eastwoods with equal care and admiration? Does Blew's novel continue its opening interest in the bodies of its characters? If so, what does the narrator show us with her eyes? In what other ways is Corey Henry like or unlike a typical western hero(ine)?

19. What does the title, *Jackalope Dreams*, mean? What does the jackalope mean to Corey? Why do you think Blew chose this title?
20. *Jackalope Dreams* is set in contemporary Montana and Blew currently lives and works in Idaho. Which of the author's observations about contemporary Montana also apply to contemporary Idaho?
21. What do voices in Corey's imagination add to the novel? Does she make peace with them?
22. The novel makes several references to Old and New West, or old order and new order. Is one better than the other - for Corey, or for anyone?
23. In her trilogy of family memoirs - *All But the Waltz*, *Balsamroot*, and *Writing Her Own Life* - Blew seems to replace damaging patriarchal stories with women's stories, however mundane and unfinished. To what extent does *Jackalope Dreams* continue the work of the family memoirs, replacing a patriarchal Old Western narrative with a New Western story more life-affirming for women?

## Little Women

1. Which character do you most closely identify with and why?
2. Does this book have appeal to modern teens? What are the enduring qualities of the book?
3. If you read this book as a child, how do you relate differently to it as an adult? Share a personal experience of reading the book as a child.
4. What makes this book memorable to you? Would you recommend it to someone to read?



5. There are a number of themes running throughout the book, some of which seem to be relevant for children and other relevant for adults. What are some of the themes that seem of most interest to children? To adults?
6. How does the relative absence of the father seem to affect the girls' behavior and their feelings toward him? Does the relationship between daughters and father seem similar to other father-daughter relationships you have seen? How does his absence affect the development of Jo's relationship with others?
7. Discuss the following characters as to their true-to-life characteristics and their impact on the story: Meg, Beth, Amy, Laurie, Aunt March, Mr. Lawrence, Marmee, Jo.
8. Discuss the enduring qualities of this book. Many scholars and readers think that this book has little appeal to modern adolescents. What do you think?
9. The manners, dress, means of transportation, whole way of life depicted in this book belong to another time. Have we totally lost the "gentility" this family exudes? Which aspects of their lives would benefit us and our children today?
10. Was Jo right to turn down Laurie's proposal? How would a twentieth century teenager have reacted?
11. How do you relate now, as an adult, to this book? What are the differences in your response to the book? Do you read it as a parent with your own children in mind, as a wife, as an interested adult or for the purpose of re-experiencing your own childhood?

## Lord of the Flies

1. What qualities of the boys' behavior -- especially Ralph's and Jack's -- stands out for you in the first few chapters? For instance, Ralph wants to be rescued. Jack wants to get meat. What is the deeper source of tension between Ralph and Jack? Is it mainly an ego battle? A struggle for dominance? Or is it a fundamental clash of values?
2. Besides Ralph and Jack, the book contains other interesting characters such as Piggy, Simon, Roger, and Samneric. Which of these were most interesting or memorable for you? Why?



3. 3. The group of boys quickly forms an ad hoc social order with Ralph, Jack, and Piggy in leadership roles and the conch as a symbol. They have meetings and assign responsibilities. Is such behavior instinctive for pre-adolescent boys, or would it have been modeled after the larger society that they were part of? How much are boys of that age capable of understanding the adult social order?
4. What is all this talk about beasts and fears, nightmares, and twisty snakelike things? What is the beast? A downed parachutist? A pig's head covered with flies? Is it real? Imagined? Does it matter? Could it be the primitive and irrational element in us all, no matter what age? Is it possible, even for civilized adults, to kill the beast?
5. Gradually the boys' behavior becomes more savage. They paint their faces and grow long hair. Jack knocks off Piggy's specs. The fire goes out. The littluns scream and have bad dreams. The initial social order disintegrates, and Jack and his hunters take control. "The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away." The chant, "Kill the pig," goes forth. What is causing the social fabric to tear?
6. The arrival of the British Navy gunboat at the end, as the island is burning, reintroduces the element of adult civilization and order to the tale. The officer is at first amused and then dismayed by the boys' appearance and conduct. He says he should have expected better from "a pack of British boys." Why? Because they were British? Because they were boys?

## Passages West: 19 Stories of Youth & Identity

1. Nichols tells us in the preface that he wanted "to put good stories before readers." How do you think these selections offer "a good read"?
2. Which of these stories made you feel the "shock of recognition" that Nichols felt when reading stories rooted in the land and the people of the West, especially of "formative experiences" of young people coming of age?
3. What are some of the questions about youth and identity at the heart of these stories?
4. Which examples of the tension between teenagers and adults stood out to you? Was it because those incidents were most relatable, or because they were more extreme?



5. Most of the books in this series, "Growing Older, Growing Wiser," center around characters at more advanced stages of life. How does this collection about adolescents fit under the theme of "Growing Older, Growing Wiser"?
6. Why do you think death figures so prominently in these stories?
7. Talk about the need for these young characters to prove themselves, to be self-reliant and valiant. Is that true only of youth? Or does it stay with us; is it ageless and timeless? Is that need to be heroic, to somehow control events, the reason for the appeal of stories about superheroes so evident in today's media and dating back to earliest literature?

## Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

1. Does the author demonstrate her hope for the future in this book? How?
2. Have you ever felt yourself to be the victim of prejudice, racial, social, sexual, religious, etc.? How did you deal with it?
3. This book presents disturbing incidents about racism and prejudice. It also challenges readers with a serious and complex plot and themes. Is it an appropriate book for children? Why or why not?
4. What are some positive values portrayed in the story?
5. List ways the lives of the white and black children are different in this novel. Are there any parallels today in Idaho communities?
6. What is the value of presenting a story that may provide experiences foreign to our own children's and grandchildren's lives?
7. What is the significance of "the land" in this novel? What is its importance to the Logans? To Mr. Granger? To the story itself?
8. In what ways do you think young people today could relate to this novel? What relevance could it have for any of us today?
9. What is one of the scenes that you find most notable in the book? Feel free to read a passage from the scene and explain why it is notable to you.



10. Mr. Morrison is associated with thunder in the book. His voice sounds like thunder and he sings to the thunder while guarding the Logan family home. What is the significance of Mr. Morrison being associated with thunder?
11. Many of us lived through the turbulent 60's when the Civil Rights Amendments were finally enacted, and so many adult readers might understand the history, background, and setting of this novel. How would a young reader access this novel? If you prepared the reader from an historical perspective, would you do it before, during, or after reading?
12. This novel is autobiographical. Do you feel it is an honest story in representing rural society in the South in the 1930's?
13. Aside from the social history lesson, the story is about Cassie's growth. Discuss her character and what she learns as the novel progresses.
14. Did reading this book make you want to know more about this family and this time in our history? (Taylor has written several other novels using her childhood experiences as a basis: Let the Circle Be Unbroken, The Road to Memphis, The Well)?

## Tatterhood and Other Tales

Questions for this title are forthcoming.

## The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

1. From the book's opening sentence, Arnold bursts onto the scene with a brash and funny style that punctures pretense and pulls no punches. He claims to be a "truth teller," but do you trust him? Are there different types of truth? For instance, how can this book be the absolute truth if it's fiction?
2. What do you make of Mr. P's pep talk to Arnold after being hit by the book? What is all the talk about killing Indians? Do you agree that staying on the rez would mean being killed? Is this more true for Arnold than for other Indian children? Isn't leaving the rez just another way of "killing the Indian"? Why? Or why not?



3. Discuss the adults in Arnold's life -- Mr. P, his parents, his grandparents, his grandmother, Eugene, his basketball coach. What sort of role models do they provide? Do your impressions of them change over the course of the story? What does Arnold come to understand about them?
4. What are some of the more important differences between life in Welpinit and in Reardan? How do those differences reinforce or contradict traditional stereotypes of the two cultures? How do they affect a young person's chances of living a successful and fulfilling life? How well does Arnold manage to integrate the two cultures in his life?
5. After Grandmother Spirit's death, followed by Eugene's and Bobby's, and a short time later by his sister's, Arnold is torn between waves of confused emotions. How does he deal with the grief, and what is it that helps restore his hope?
6. As Arnold points out several times, alcohol is a big problem on the reservation, and it is implicated in both his sister's death and Eugene's. But is it the cause of those deaths, or merely the symptom of a deeper cause? Or are the alcohol abuse and other problems so deeply intertwined that they can no longer be sorted out?
7. At the end of the book, Arnold again asks Rowdy to join him at Reardan, and again Rowdy refuses, but this time with understanding, even admiration. What has changed? What has Rowdy learned, and why does he choose to remain on the rez?

## The Bean Trees

1. What were your thoughts about the book? Which parts were most meaningful to you?
2. What does the title mean in relation to the book? It obviously relates to the wisteria plants on page 143, but what else?
3. The novel deals with lots of serious and heavy issues—child (sexual) abuse, illegal immigration, depression (p. 173), divorce, etc. Did you find the book to be depressing or uplifting? Why?
4. The support and encouragement Taylor gets from mother seems to be the source of much of her confidence. How does her view of Taylor on p. 10 compare to the way Taylor treats Turtle? What about the other mother figures in the book—LouAnn, Esperanza, and Mattie? How do their approaches to parenthood relate to Taylor's?



5. Did Taylor do the right thing in keeping Turtle in Chapter 1 (pp.18-19)? If not, what do you think she should have done?
6. Taylor and Turtle arrive in Tucson with no money, flat tires, and no friends. Yet they are able to survive and thrive. What makes this possible? Is it believable to you?
7. The novel seems to take a very sympathetic view of illegal immigrants, focusing on the suffering and loss they experienced back home (pp. 134), as well as the difficulties they face within the United States. Does this portrayal seem realistic to you? Does it influence your own views about immigration?
8. There are very few men in the book, with the exception of Estevan. Did that seem like a strength or a weakness of the novel? What is the effect of reading about a female-dominated story?
9. In Chapter 16, Taylor gets Estevan and Esperanza to pose as Turtle's Cherokee relatives to allow her to adopt Turtle legally. What do you think of this decision?

## The Bridge to Terabithia

1. How does the book fit with the theme of Connecting Generations?
2. Are there disturbing elements of childhood presented in this book? What are they?
3. As a child, did you ever experience bullying? How did you deal with it then? How would you deal with it now?
4. Why do you think the author used swear words in writing a children's book?
5. Does learning about people's personal problems help us deal with difficult people? Where in the book do we gain empathy for others?
6. Can dreaming and imagining be a good way to escape the pressures and stress of daily life or is it a waste of time?
7. Does this book have therapeutic value in dealing with the loss of a loved one?
8. Is Jess's reaction to news of Leslie's death plausible? What does he gain by her death?



9. Do most children create magical kingdoms or demonstrate in some way the need to retreat from the harsh realities of the adult world?

## The Enders Hotel

1. What expectations does the brief opening chapter, "Restless Men," create for the reader?
2. Schrand refers to his first stepfather, Kent, as a mean drunk—"He was violent when he drank, and he drank often. It is the oldest of stories." What makes this "the oldest of stories?" What other "same old stories" do you find in this work?
3. Grandfather has emphysema; Brandon is asthmatic. Talk about how characters struggle to breathe in this memoir in a metaphorical sense.
4. Great-grandfather Albert Beus was a bootlegger, while Shrand's grandfather formed a local Alcoholics Anonymous group. Alcohol flows throughout this story. Talk about the opposing influences of alcohol and AA on the characters.
5. The Enders Hotel is a three-story "brick mammoth" at the center of town. Could it be a symbol for rootedness? How does it provide a sense of home, however briefly, for a footloose cast? It was built by immigrants—travelers, too—but they had settled in one place for 30+ years. They put down roots and stayed. How did the early generation of immigrants differ from this current cast of wayfarers?
6. The Beuses helped all sorts of people but ordered Kenny to stay out of the place. Why is he such an outcast in a collection of misfits—beyond the limits of their sympathy and generosity?
7. Schrand talks about the "hauntingly tentative" nature of trying to stay sober. Is that an old story, too—the tentativeness of trying to sober up and recover from addiction? Are the families of alcoholics and addicts never on solid ground?
8. Grandmother had a mastectomy without telling her husband. "It was just one of those things I had to do by myself." Where do you see examples of strength and stoicism in this story?
9. Talk about how tides of boom and droughts of bust shape the story of America's West.



10. Two men died of CO poisoning in their car in the parking lot, and all evidence was removed before the breakfast crowd arrived: "just a few leaves of paperwork" In his search for his history, his identity, his legacy, is Brandon trying to avoid being one of those anonymous enders?
11. One reviewer said longing is the central theme of this memoir: "the longing of a boy to be a man, the longing of the man to connect with the boy he once was, and the longing of a son for a father he never knew." (Western American Literature) Would you agree? What other themes can you identify?
12. Why does Brandon envy his cousins? What role does the ranch play in this memoir in contrast to *The Enders*?
13. Discuss Brandon's ambivalence toward the Enders: At times, he clings to it as his home and is "devastated" when he has to move away; at other times, he resents living in a hotel and can't wait to leave Soda Springs. He doesn't want his grandmother to sell it, even though he says, "It killed Grandpa." Finally, he seems offended that the new owners omitted his family's story from the history of the hotel. Talk about the author's assertion that "a place can be a complicated thing."
14. Brandon's family seems to always be in the business of renovation. He suggests that the family, though, was the end product. How was their self-renovation successful or not?

## The Old Man and the Sea

1. Is this really about an old man and the sea? Or is it about an old man and a fish? Or about an old man and a young boy? Or maybe these are all bound up together. Certainly, the sea and the fish dominate the old man's attention for most of the tale, yet he also says that he likes to go out alone "beyond all the people in the world," but he wishes he had the boy with him. He says, "I told the boy I was a strange old man . . . Now is when I must prove it." What is he trying to prove?
2. Speaking of the fish, he says, "He is my brother, but I must kill him." He claims to love the fish, yet he will kill it. Why does this fish mean so much to him? How are they alike? Do you see any parallels between the old man's quest for the fish and Ahab's search for Moby Dick? How are they similar, and how are they different?



3. At one point the old man compares himself to Joe DiMaggio. At another, he recalls an arm wrestling match with a Negro. What's the point? Is this just an instance of an old guy trying to prove his manhood to himself and a young boy? Or is it some sort of spiritual quest? Or possibly both? What if he hadn't caught the fish? Would he have considered himself a failure?
4. During the shark attack, he feels regret about the way things have turned out, but reflects, ""Do not think about sin . . . There are enough problems without sin. Also, I have no understanding of it," and "You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman." To what extent could this internal conversation be seen as a meditation on killing?
5. Although for much of the book, not much happens, the old man is an acute observer of nature. He notices many details of water, lines, birds, clouds, and sea life. Even his thoughts seem to be concrete and image based, rather than abstract and philosophical. The sentences are mostly short and straightforward, the vocabulary lean and spare. The main characters don't even have names. Did you find this narrative style effective? Did it hold your attention throughout?
6. A man, a boy, and a fish, which also appears to be male -- this would certainly appear to be a masculine story, perhaps one that says something about a distinctly male way of being in the world, one that is being passed down from generation to generation. What are the characteristics of this ethos? Is it exclusively masculine, or is it something that women can also relate to?

## The Secret Life of Bees

1. Right from the start, Lily comes across as a complex and interesting narrator. How would you describe her feelings for her mother? For T. Ray? For Rosaleen? For bees?
2. Despite the many differences between them, Lily and Rosaleen share a strong bond. What is the source of their closeness and how does it survive the many changes in both of their lives over the course of the book?
3. While Lily is staying with the Calendar sisters, she is introduced to the Daughters of Mary, their traditions, stories, and rituals, including the Lady of Chains. Would you call



this a religion? At one point, August tells Lily, "You see, every body needs a God who looks like them." Otis, a man, can participate in the ceremony, but not Lily. Why not?

4. This book is also about stories and storytelling. What are some of the stories that are told within the book? Who tells them and why? Pick one story and tell how it relates to the larger themes and issues in the book.
5. Bees and beekeeping are important elements of the story. Besides being a central focus of life with the Calendar sisters, they also have symbolic overtones that resonate throughout. Discuss how the bee lore contributes to the story. How do the bees help reveal character? How do bees resemble humans? How do they differ? Why are they so important to the people in the story? Be sure to consider the title: What is their secret life?
6. At fourteen, somewhere between childhood innocence and the complexities of adulthood, Lily tries to sort out and understand who she is so she can break free of the inner turmoil that haunts her and unchain herself from her past. In the end she appears to have succeeded. What events and people have helped her? How? And why?
7. This book is set in 1964 in a small town in South Carolina, but here we are now in Idaho, reading and discussing it. What aspects of the story seem unique to that time and place? What themes, characters, and incidents reach beyond that time and place to speak to you as a reader, here and now?

## The Wind in the Willows

1. How are time and perspective woven into the story?
2. Discuss the human characteristics and values portrayed through animals in the story.
3. What does the wind in Wind in the Willows symbolize?
4. Is this a book you would want to share with your children or grandchildren?
5. Is the story still relevant today?
6. Reviewer Richard Middleton in Vanity Fair wrote: "The book for me is notable for its intimate sympathy with nature and for its delicate expression of emotions. When all is said the boastful, unstable Toad; the hospitable Water Rat; the shy, wise, childlike



Badger; and the Mole with his pleasant habit of brave boyish impulse, are neither animals nor men, but are types of that deeper humanity which sways us all.” Do you agree with this statement?

7. Where did Grahame get Ratty, Toad, Mole, and Badger, and, more important, why?
8. Peter Green, Grahame’s biographer, says of Wind in the Willows, “Its symbolism embodies some of mankind’s deepest and most ineradicable yearnings: the pastoral dream, the Golden Age, the search for lost innocence.” Others see Grahame’s book focusing on friendship, home, and “right action.” Are there other values that you found in your reading? Are these values still meaningful? How do they play out in our modern world?
9. Each chapter has at least one visually memorable event. Because these events usually require motion and often evoke other senses besides sight and sound, they often are not illustrated. Choose several chapters in which the climactic scene is not illustrated in your book and explain what you would see, hear, smell, feel, etc. if a multimedia, multisensory “illustration” could be created. Don’t forget taste!

## 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?

## The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

1. Almost everyone will know this story, at least in outline, either from having seen the movie or perhaps having it read to them. Describe your first encounter with the tale. Was it through the book or the movie? How was this reading of the story different? Were you surprised that the Land of Oz wasn't over the rainbow, but across a desert? Did you notice any satire or other social comment that escaped you earlier?
2. Setting off on her quest for OZ, and ultimately for Kansas, Dorothy collects three companions, each with a particular shortcoming. How real or important are these deficits? For instance, how are they tested in the dark wood? Why shouldn't the



Scarecrow want a heart and the Tin Woodman a brain? Does the Tin Woodman seem smarter than the Scarecrow?

3. The Great Oz has quite a reputation, but are there early hints that it may not be wholly deserved? Did you catch on before Dorothy as to why the green glasses were required in the Emerald City? Does Oz, in his various forms, remind you of any other leaders or rulers in literature or in life? How does your opinion of him change after he is exposed?
4. Wicked witches, wildcats, hammerheads, a giant spider, wolves and crows and killer bees, slavery and black magic, and, of course, the nearly lethal red poppies -- there is clearly a dark side to the Land of Oz. Is this too much for young children? Do you recall being disturbed or frightened by any of this as a child?
5. The Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, even the Wizard himself have been changed significantly by events. But what of Dorothy? How much and in what ways has she changed by the time she arrives back in Kansas? She couldn't bring back the silver slippers, but has she brought anything back? What might she have gained or lost?
6. Some readers have seen the story, though written by a man, as an early example of a feminist children's tale featuring a strong, capable, and self-confident little girl who helps the male characters overcome their self doubts and succeed while reaching her own goals as well. Others claim that in returning home, she consigns herself to a dull, uninspiring future on an isolated Kansas farm. What do you think?

## When We Were Romans

1. Most readers are struck at once by the voice and style of Lawrence, the insightful nine-year-old narrator. How do you react to this style with its frequent run-on sentences and other grammatical lapses? Do you find it engaging? Distracting? Did you get more used to it as the book progressed?
2. Early on, the book introduces tension between generations as Lawrence struggles to support his mother, without understanding the complexities of her situation. How well does he handle this? What do you make of the way she talks to and manages her children?



3. Lawrence spends a lot of time reading, and short summaries from the Space Book and Horrible Histories are interspersed throughout the book. Did you find these to be interesting and enjoyable, or did they seem more like interruptions and distractions? Did some appeal to you more than others?
4. How did Hannah, the mother, come across to you early in the book? She was obviously quite stressed before leaving England, but what of her decision to go to Rome? Did it seem desperate? Rational? Practical? Selfish? What did she seem to be looking for? Escape? A fresh start? Her lost youth?
5. Lawrence likes to identify people with the animals they resemble, then to use that animal as a nickname. Do you recall any of the characters and the animals they resembled? Did this nicknaming help you to envision them? To keep track of them? What do you make of the fact that Gabrielly had no animal?
6. Though Lawrence is only nine, he catches glimpses of the complex world of adulthood, in part through his readings, but more directly through the words and actions of his mother and her friends. Given his necessarily limited understanding of adult issues and actions, how does he manage to adapt to his life in Rome? What do you think of the way he relates to Jemima and Hermann?
7. For most of the book, we only hear about Mikie, the father, second hand, yet he hovers over events like a dark mysterious cloud. As his presence becomes more deeply felt, Hannah grows more stressed, and Lawrence gets more caught up in the tension. Readers may wonder, is Mikie really there in Rome? Is Hannah going mad? Was he ever as bad as we've been led to believe? How did you feel when you finally met him in person? At what point did you think he might not be as evil as he had been portrayed?