**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.

**Behind the Beautiful Forevers**

1. Katharine Boo has said that one of the questions that led her to explore life in Annawadi was, “Why don’t the poor storm the gates of the luxury hotels?” Does the book provide an answer to this question? Do you think that each Annawadi resident might answer it differently?
2. Which of the Annawadi residents depicted in the book has the “best” life? Why?
3. Why do you think this book was chosen for the National Book Award? What specific qualities recommend it as a “distinguished” or otherwise exemplary piece of nonfiction? If you were on the judging panel, do you think you might have argued for--or against-- its receiving the award?
4. Does Asha have a point when she argues that something isn’t wrong if the powerful people say that it’s right? How does constant exposure to corruption change a person’s internal understanding of right and wrong?
5. What do you think is the author’s opinion about graft, fraud, or corruption? Can you tell?
6. Which of the residents of Annawadi did you find most memorable? Did you feel any connection to any of them?
7. If you have seen or read any other depiction of life in India (fiction or nonfiction), how does *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* compare to these other perspectives?
8. Did you find the ending of the book satisfying? Why or why not?

**Faithful and Virtuous Night**

1. What is your experience with reading poetry? Did you find reading *Faithful and Virtuous Night* challenging? Did you have a specific method for reading it?
2. What character or characters recur in the collection?
3. How does the book deal with the concept of death?
4. What line or lines stood out to you most? What was their effect on you?
5. Do you see a connection among the prose portions of the collection? How, if at all, do they interact with the portions structured as poems?
6. In her Nobel Prize lecture, Louise Gluck said, “The poems to which I have, all my life, been most ardently drawn are poems of the kind I have described, poems of intimate selection or collusion, poems to which the listener or reader makes an essential contribution, as recipient of a confidence or an outcry, sometimes as co-conspirator. [. . .] Some poets do not see reaching many in spatial terms, as in the filled auditorium. They see reaching many temporally, sequentially, many over time, into the future, but in some profound way these readers always come singly, one by one.” To what extent do you feel she might be trying to reach you as a reader “one by one?” Do any of these poems make you feel like a “co-conspirator”?

**Less**

1. What is the role of *memory* in the novel? What do you think is the most interesting or telling flashback or memory that Less describes? What triggers the memory for him?
2. Which one of Less’ trips is the funniest? Which is the one that seems most relatable?
3. Have you ever gone to great lengths to avoid a social invitation or obligation? What does Less’ decision to travel the world say about the impact of Freddy’s wedding?
4. In what ways does Arthur’s trip change him? Do you think the change is for the better?
5. In a scene at a party in Paris, Less is told that in fact he is not a bad writer, as he had come to believe, but a bad “gay writer,” in that he is not telling the narratives the gay writing community wants him to. What do you make of this critique?
6. The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction is awarded “For distinguished fiction published in book form during the year by an American author, preferably dealing with American life.” Do you think that *Less*, given its settings, is “dealing with American life?” Why or why not?
7. What are Less’ thoughts on aging? Do they change over the course of the novel?
8. Who is the narrator? Why does it matter?

**The Nickel Boys**

1. Is there a clear “villain” in *The Nickel Boys*? If so, who or what is it?
2. Nickel Academy is ostensibly a school. How does the novel treat education in general? What are the boys “learning” at Nickel?
3. Though *The Nickel Boys* is a novel, it is based on a very real place. The Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys was in operation from 1900 to 2011 and was segregated by race until 1966. Allegations of abuse are recorded almost from the school’s founding. Why do you think that Whitehead chose to tell a *fictional* story about this kind of facility? Is there anything that a novel can do that nonfiction can’t, in this case?
4. Did you find the ending of the book satisfying? Surprising?
5. In the novel, Elwood spends time contemplating the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who “called upon his Negro audience to cultivate that pure love for their oppressors, that it might carry them to the other side of the struggle.” How does Elwood act upon his understanding of King’s message? How do his actions contrast with Turner’s?
6. The narrative moves back and forth in time. Do you notice any changes between these sections, beyond the obvious change in setting?
7. What are your thoughts about Elwood’s parents?
8. One review of the novel noted, “In a mass culture where there is no shortage of fiction, nonfiction, movies and documentaries dramatizing slavery and its sequels under other names (whether Jim Crow or mass incarceration or ‘I can’t breathe’), Whitehead is implicitly asking why so much of this output has so little effect or staying power.” What do you make of this? Do you agree that depictions of racism in writing or on film have had “so little effect” on the “sequels” of slavery?

**The Girl Who Fell from the Ski**

1. How does Rachel’s understanding of “race” as a concept change when she moves to the United States? *Why* does her perception change?
2. Why can’t Rachel be with her family in Denmark?
3. If Aunt Loretta and Nella could have had a relationship, what might it have been like? Would they be friends?
4. Many readers and critics have compared this novel to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Durrow herself has written, “It wasn't until many years after I read it that I realized I had a story to tell that was in some ways a kind of ‘sequel’ to *The Bluest Eye*.” If you have read the Morrison novel, in what ways do you think *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* is similar? In what ways do you think it might be considered a “kind of sequel”?
5. What do you think about Roger? How much do we know about him, and why isn’t he more involved with Rachel?
6. What is Brick’s role in the novel?
7. The award granted to the novel, the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction, was founded by the author and poet Barbara Kingsolver in 2000. It is awarded every two years to “promote fiction that addresses issues of social justice and the impact of culture and politics on human relationships.” How does this novel address these issues?
8. Is this novel “universal” in any sense? What elements of Rachel’s story might be applicable to any person? Which are specific to someone in her unique circumstances?

**All the Light We Cannot See**

1. The book opens with two epigraphs. How do these quotes set the scene for the rest of the book? Discuss how the radio plays a major part in the story and the time period. How do you think the impact of the radio back then compares with the impact of the Internet on today’s society?
2. The narration moves back and forth both in time and between different characters. How did this affect your reading experience? How do you think the experience would have been different if the story had been told entirely in chronological order?
3. Whose story did you enjoy the most? Was there any character you wanted more insight into?
4. On page 160, Marie-Laure realizes “This...is the basis of his fear, all fear. That a light you are powerless to stop will turn on you and usher a bullet to its mark.” How does this image constitute the most general basis of all fear? Do you agree?
5. Reread Madame Manec’s boiling frog analogy on page 284. Etienne later asks Marie-Laure, “Who was supposed to be the frog? Her? Or the Germans?” (page 328) Who did you think Madame Manec meant? Could it have been someone other than herself or the Germans? What does it say about Etienne that he doesn’t consider himself to be the frog?
6. On page 390, the author writes, “To shut your eyes is to guess nothing of blindness.” What did you learn or realize about blindness through Marie-Laure’s perspective? Do you think her being blind gave her any advantages?
7. One of Werner’s bravest moments is when he confronts von Rumpel: “All your life you wait, and then it finally comes, and are you ready?” (page 465) Have you ever had a moment like that? Were you ready? What would you say that moment is for some of the other characters?
8. Von Rumpel seemed to believe in the power of the Sea of Flames, but was it truly a supernatural object or was it merely a gemstone at the center of coincidence? Do you think it brought any protection to Marie-Laure and/or bad luck to those she loved?
9. The 1970s image of Jutta is one of a woman deeply guilt-ridden and self-conscious about her identity as a German. Why do you think she feels so much guilt over the crimes of others? Can you relate to this? Do you think she should feel any shame about her identity?
10. What do you think of the author’s decision to flash forward at the end of the book? Did you like getting a peek into the future of some of these characters? Did anything surprise you?

**Empire Falls**

1. How do the author’s descriptions of the physical setting of Empire Falls contribute to your understanding of the town and its people?
2. “One of the good things about small towns, Miles’s mother had always maintained, was that they accommodated just about everyone” [p. 21]. Is this an accurate description of Empire Falls? Which characters in particular benefit from this attitude? What influences the level of tolerance Miles is willing to extend to Max Roby, Walt Comeau and Jimmy Minty, all of whom are constant irritants to him? What does he see as the redeeming characteristics in each of them?
3. Why is his relationship with Tick so important to Miles? In what ways is it reminiscent of his mother’s attachment to him?
4. Even before the full story of Grace and Max’s marriage is revealed, what hints are there that Grace was less than the ideal wife and mother that Miles remembers and reveres?
5. Why does Miles choose to accept his mother’s version of events of their trip to Martha’s Vineyard, even though it entails a betrayal of his father [pp. 136-47]?
6. When Miles finally realizes who Charlie Mayne really is, does it change his feelings about Grace in a significant way? Would he have felt differently if Grace were still alive and able to answer his questions?
7. Janine calls Miles “The World’s Most Transparent Man” [p. 42] and Tick says, “It’s not like you don’t have any [secrets] …It’s just that everybody figures them out” [p. 107]. Does Mrs. Whiting share this image of Miles? What evidence is there that she sees and understands more about the “real” Miles than the people closest to him do?
8. How does Russo use minor characters to fill out his portraits of the main figures? What roles do Horace Weymouth, Bea Majeski, Charlene and Otto Meyer play in shaping your impressions of and opinions about Miles, Janine and Tick?
9. Empire Falls traces three very different families—the Whitings, the Robys, and the Mintys—through several generations. What does each of these families represent in terms of American society in general?
10. What specific elements of Empire Falls recommend it as a Pulitzer winner? Recall that the Pulitzer in fiction is for “distinguished fiction published in book form by an American author, preferably dealing with American life.” What about the novel seems especially “distinguished,” and what aspects of American life does it seem to address most closely?

**March**

1. Discuss the significance of characters' names, especially Grace. How does she help March attain grace? Also Annie's children, Prudence and Justice. Was it prudent of March and Grace to try to teach the girl to read? Who, if anyone, receives justice in this story?
2. Consider the meaning of "A Good Kind Man" (Chapter 13, and again in Ch. 17). March is saved once by the slave girl Zannah writing on the scrap who he is and that he deserves to be saved, as he is a good, kind man. Grace counsels Marmee that if she wants to bring him back to life, she must give him hope and remind him that he is a good, kind man. Is he? Explain how/why we should perceive him that way. What about his cowardice and the dire consequences it had for others? What about his decision to teach Prudence and the consequences that befell Grace? Are these the acts of a good, kind man?
3. Compare the temperaments of Grace and Marmee.
4. Discuss communication and miscommunication between March and Marmee and "letters filled with lies." What does Marmee learn about truth and lies when she sits down to write a letter home to the girls?
5. How is March changed by his experiences, from a man of "moral certainty…who knew with such clear confidence exactly what it was that he was meant to do" (184)?
6. What does the entry from Louisa May Alcott's hospital journal add to your reading of March?
7. Geraldine Brooks worked as a war correspondent in Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans. Do you see any influence of that work in *March*?
8. Why do you think this book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize? How does it exemplify, in the words of the Pulitzer Foundation, “distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life’?

**Pilgrim at Tinker Creek**

1. At one point Dillard writes, “I am…passionately interested in where I am” (128). Does it seem to you that this is what she asks of us as readers? Do you think she succeeds in that aim? That is, are there parts of the book where Dillard makes you want to put down her book, take a walk outside, and look around you?
2. In the chapter entitled “Intricacy” Dillard asserts, “That there are so many details seems to be the most important and visible fact about the creation” (129). “It’s all in the details,” we sometimes say, jokingly. This book is teeming with intricate details. What might be the drawback in that? What are the advantages?
3. One might say this book is dominated by verbs of seeing (see/saw, look, watch, notice) and by the opposite nouns (Scene, view, eye, light). “It’s all a matter of keeping my eyes open,” she observes early in her book (17). Can you locate two or three passages where such language predominates? What do you suppose is Dillard’s intention? How does she get from the visual to the visionary?
4. In her chapter on fecundity Dillard asks herself (and us) what it is about that subject that “so appalls.” She has just awakened from a nightmare that involved mating Luna moths and a bed full of fish swarming “in a viscid slime” (160). Many episodes in this book involve procreation and they appear to be at least equally balanced by scenes of death, like the memorable one early on in which a giant water bug devours a frog. What do you think she is getting at here?
5. Does it seem to you that Dillard emphasizes the beauty in nature, or something else (not necessarily its opposite)? In *A River Runs Through It* Norman Maclean describes the brown trout as “being beautiful by being partly ugly.” Where do you think you might see evidence of that sort of attitude in this book?
6. What are, for you, the most memorable episodes in this book? Do they possess any features in common? Do you find yourself drawn more, for example, to the episodes involving insects, or trees, or birds, or maybe muskrats? In short, when Dillard is writing at her best, as you see it, what sort of thing is she saying? What is she seeing or thinking about?
7. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the Pulitzer for nonfiction in 1975. What in your opinion makes the book an “award winner”? If you have read other books for this theme, have you noticed any connection? Any common qualities or themes that seem to be “award worthy”?

**The Grapes of Wrath**

1. The structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* includes narrative or “storytelling” chapters as well as brief and more poetic interchapters. Why do you think Steinbeck used this structure? What seems to be the purpose of the interchapters?
2. An important thematic element in the book is the tragic discrepancy between the myth and reality of California. What visions do the characters have of a better life in this Promised Land? How do the realities of California live up to these expectations?
3. Steinbeck once wrote that he intended to “rip” his readers’ nerves “to rags” by making them “participate in the actuality” of his characters’ lives. How well does Steinbeck achieve this intention? Cite specific examples to support your answer.
4. Discuss the origins and expression of the anti-Okie mentality. What kinds of discrimination do the Joads and the other Dust Bowl migrants encounter?
5. Discuss Steinbeck’s treatment of poverty. What changes does poverty create in the personalities, family structure, and values of the characters?
6. What are the elements of Steinbeck’s critique of the American political and economic system? What sort of revolution does Steinbeck seem to be forecasting? Discuss the radicalization of his characters. To what extent are these critiques still relevant?
7. Analyze Steinbeck’s development of the theme of unity. Does his vision of unity extend to all mankind (including the California farmers and cops) or is it exclusively a class unity?
8. Some critics have suggested that the key meaning of the book lies in its Biblical and Christian symbolism. Do you agree with this interpretation? Why or why not?
9. When the novel was published in 1939, it was banned in communities in California and elsewhere as “obscene” and as “propaganda.” Why do you think the novel provoked such a negative reaction? Why would some people want to see the novel suppressed?
10. From what you know of the conditions of migratory farm workers in the west today, how have conditions changed in the eighty years since *The Grapes of Wrath* was published? If you were to write a novel today about the migrants, what themes would you include?
11. When people talk about “the Great American Novel,” *The Grapes of Wrath* is often cited as the primary example. Why?

**To Kill a Mocking Bird**

1. How do Scout, Jem, and Dill characterize Boo Radley at the beginning of the book? In what way did Boo's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell? Does this repetition of aggression make him more or less of a sympathetic character?
2. The title of Lee's book is alluded to when Atticus gives his children air rifles and tells them that they can shoot all the bluejays they want, but "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." At the end of the novel, Scout likens the "sin" of naming Boo as Bob Ewell's killer to "shootin' a mockingbird." Do you think that Boo is the only innocent, or mockingbird, in this novel?
3. Scout ages two years—from six to eight—over the course of Lee's novel, which is narrated from her perspective as an adult. Did you find the account her narrator provides believable? Were there incidents or observations in the book that seemed unusually "knowing" for such a young child? What event or episode in Scout's story do you feel truly captures her personality?
4. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been challenged repeatedly by the political left and right, who have sought to remove it from libraries for its portrayal of conflict between children and adults; ungrammatical speech; references to sex, the supernatural, and witchcraft; and unfavorable presentation of blacks. Which elements of the book (if any) do you think touch on controversial issues in our contemporary culture? Did you find any of those elements especially troubling, persuasive, or insightful?
5. Jem describes to Scout the four "folks" or classes of people in Maycomb County: "our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." What do you think of the ways in which Lee explores race and class in 1930s Alabama? What significance, if any, do you think these characterizations have for people living in other parts of the world?
6. One of the chief criticisms of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that the two central storylines—Scout, Jem, and Dill's fascination with Boo Radley and the trial between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson—are not sufficiently connected in the novel. Do you think that Lee is successful in incorporating these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved? Why or why not?
7. By the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the book's first sentence: "When he was thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow," has been explained and resolved. What did you think of the events that followed the Halloween pageant? Did you think that Bob Ewell was capable of injuring Scout or Jem? How did you feel about Boo Radley's last-minute intervention?
8. What elements of this book did you find especially memorable, humorous, or inspiring? Are there individual characters whose beliefs, acts, or motives especially impressed or surprised you? Did any events in this book cause you to reconsider your childhood memories or experiences in a new light?
9. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is of course a Pulitzer winner, but it has also been referred to in the US and in the United Kingdom as “everyone’s favorite book.” How do you account for this? Is it on your list of favorites?