

Forest Gate

Reading Group Guide

Set in the slums of contemporary London, *Forest Gate* chronicles the lives of the dual narrators—James and Armeina—in the wake of a double suicide attempt which James survives but Ashvin, Armeina’s brother, does not. Through the heart-wrenchingly human voices of Armeina and James, we learn about the extraordinarily sad family history of both narrators. Armeina, called Meina, was forced to flee Somalia with her brother Ashvin after the two witnessed the brutal murder of their intellectual parents by Ethiopian soldiers. Meina and Ashvin, with the help of their white benefactor Mr. Bloom, move to the ‘estates’ of London where they meet James, the youngest of six warlord and drug dealing brothers and the son of a crack-addicted mother. James and Meina are brought together by the tragedy of Ashvin’s death and James’ survival and fall in love in the shadow of their shared sorrow. Poignant and breathtaking, tragic and captivating, *Forest Gate* takes the reader on a journey that reminds all of us of the fragility of human life and the possibility of hope in spite of unmistakable tragedy and loss.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel opens with a double suicide attempt that is only halfway successful. Meina, as the narrator, describes the two boys preparing to die: “They were quiet as they emptied their minds, as they tried to forget life, to blend with their frail place in the universe” (15). Discuss each of the boy’s reasons for wanting to die. What would have happened if Ash lived instead of James? What if both boys died?
2. In many ways Ashvin and Meina’s parents stand as a symbol of progress in the novel. They are educated, successful, political and modern. Meina is given the choice, for example, whether she would like to be circumcised or not (57). What are other examples of the parent’s open-mindedness? How do the parents help shape the lives of Ash and Meina even after their death?
3. Consider for a moment the structure of the story. What effect does the variety of narrators have on the story overall? Meina begins and ends the story, and is, by far, the most popular narrator employed by the author. To what extent does the story become Meina’s? Why do you think the author made use of a fractured structure with several narrators? Is it successful?
4. A theme of the novel emerges on page 22 when Meina muses, “life is ultimately what you carry around in your heart.” Do you think it was worthwhile for Ashvin and Meina to leave their country for London? Consider the question from both Ashvin and Meina’s positions. How did James carry the burdens in his heart? How did Mr. Bloom? Was any character more successful at ‘carrying’ than the others? How so and to what extent?
5. Revisit the brutal fight scene between Ashvin and Nalma, starting on page 116. Easily one of the more difficult pieces to read, this scene is also a very important moment to the novel as a whole. We as readers at last have some insight into the

extremely sad and complex feelings Ashvin has been coping with since he witnessed the brutal murder of his parents. James captures well what we feel as readers when he says “I couldn’t understand why Ash was crying” (118). Discuss the ways in which this scene is important to the novel and especially to the character of Ashvin. Do you believe Ashvin’s actions were meant to be cathartic, vengeful or both?

6. On page 54, Meina says she does not have any ideas of her own that are “strong enough to want to die over.” Is this what makes Meina different from her brother? What are other differences between the siblings? Are their differences due more to circumstance or fundamental differences in their personalities?

7. At the onset of the story, Meina explains that she was named after the river Armeina that “glistened and was never disturbed” (7), according to her Mother. But Meina does not share the peaceful existence of the river and therefore prefers her nickname. In comparison, James’ six brothers are referred to throughout the story by numbers rather than names, and #5’s suicide letter at the end of the novel is the first place where their birth names are listed. Consider what a name means to the characters in *Forest Gate*. Do the use of numbers symbolize that James’ brothers seem somehow sub-human? Why do you think the author used this technique of numbers instead of names? Why are the numbers out of chronological order? How does the use of numbers compare to Meina’s given name?

8. Why do you think Meina asks James to live with her? Do you think it was her only option? Do you think Meina is in need of James or do you think James is in need of Meina? To what extent do the characters depend on one another?

9. Depression and mental illness factor heavily into the novel. Ashvin is diagnosed as bipolar after his death and #5 goes on his shooting rampage as a result of not taking his medication. Do you think it is significant that these characters suffered from mental illness? What do you think the author may be saying about the stress of living in *Forest Gate*? Does the mental illness of Ashvin and #5 present a binary of guilt versus innocence?

10. Can you find any symbolism in the title *Forest Gate*? How does the image of enclosed wilderness help determine the parameters of the story? How would you have titled the novel?

11. African American writers such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright are heavily referenced in *Forest Gate*. Ashvin and his father in particular often recited the poetry of Langston Hughes. Do you think the author meant poetry to stand as a form of freedom and escape for Ashvin and his father? How do literary role models challenge stereotypes of slum life? What does poetry symbolize in the story?

12. What role does Mr. Bloom play in the novel? Do you consider him a just character or not? Do you believe he had Meina’s best interest at heart?

13. James asks Meina: “Do you blame me for what happened to Ashvin? Be honest” (143). Do you think Meina forgives James? Do James and Meina forgive Ashvin? What role do you think guilt played in the suicide attempts? Does James feel guilty for surviving? Does Meina feel guilty for her brother’s death?

14. How does the sojourn to Cornwall change Meina and James’ relationship? Do you think the shift in setting—from the enclosed slums to the open sea—is responsible for James and Meina finally sleeping together and opening up to one another?

15. On page 147, James describes listening to Meina read Richard Wright’s book as “one of those stories you read and never forget, one that made you feel for your ancestors, one that made all your own troubles pale in comparison” (147). Do you think this is a fair way to characterize *Forest Gate*? Did the voices of James and Meina bring alive for you what it means to be **SOMALI**? What it means to be victimized by circumstance? What it means to be trapped?

16. Discuss the ending of the story. Do you think it was a happy ending? Do you think there is a future for Meina and James? For James’s nephew?

Additional Activities: Ways of Enhancing Your Book Club

1. *Forest Gate* lets readers glimpse into the world of a SOMALI woman living in London. Explore further what it means to be a young woman in Somalia and a young Muslim SOMALI woman living in London by having each member of your book club read a copy of *Infidel* (Free Press, 2008) by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Can you find any comparisons between Ayaan and Meina?

2. Have a movie night with your book club and rent “The Class (Entre Les Murs)” (2008). Is this school similar to the school James and Ashvin attended? How so? Does the slum life in the film remind you of the slums of *Forest Gate*? What are the differences between the book and the film?

3. In the novel, Meina visits the **SOMALI** restaurant Zudzi (62) after she learns of Ashvin’s death. Meina is reminded of her lost home, of her lost Mother and says the food was “so delicious I almost wept” (63). Host a book club meeting in a local SOMALI restaurant or have a potluck with traditional SOMALI dishes. Over lunch, discuss what it means to be displaced. What would you miss most? Can you relate to Meina’s story?

4. Explore Langston Hughes poetry further by picking up a copy of *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (Vintage Classics, 1995). Select a poem and have each member of your group take turns reading the same poem aloud. How does the poem make you feel? Is there a difference when several voices read the same poem? What effect did reading poetry aloud have on your group? Did reading aloud allow you to better relate to Ashvin’s love of reciting poetry?