

Mornings in Jenin
By Susan Abulhawa

Reading Group Guide

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Mornings in Jenin*, a powerful story of one family's endurance through sixty years of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

About this book

Mornings in Jenin follows four generations of the Abulheja family through upheaval and violence in their homeland. The family has deep roots in Ein Hod, a tranquil village of olive farmers. When Israel declares statehood in 1948, the peace of Ein Hod is shattered forever: The entire community is forced to move to a refugee camp in Jenin. As the young mother Dalia Abulheja guides her sons through the caravan of chaos, an Israeli soldier snatches her baby, Ismael, from her arms. The soldier brings the Palestinian child home to his wife, a Holocaust survivor, founding a family based on a lie: Baby Ismael grows up as David, an Israeli who will unwittingly fight against his own people in wars to come.

In Jenin, the Abulheja family welcomes a daughter, Amal, who loves nothing more than listening to her doting father, Hasan, read Arabic verses. But in the war of 1967, Hasan disappears, Dalia loses her wits, and young Amal barely survives a week hiding in a bomb shelter. Amal must leave Jenin behind in order to fulfill her lost father's wishes for her education. As Israeli-Palestinian tensions reach a crescendo in 1982, Amal loses almost everyone she loves in the Lebanon War. She must raise her newborn daughter, Sara, by herself in America, forever scarred by the loss of her homeland, her family, and her love. Only a visit from an Israeli named David—Amal's long-lost brother, on a quest for his true identity—can shake Amal from her stoicism, inspiring a return trip to the Middle East with her daughter. Together, Amal and Sara rediscover a shattered homeland that may never be the same.

Mornings in Jenin unveils the humanity behind one of the most intractable political conflicts of our time, revealing the universal desire for a homeland, community, and safety.

For discussion

1. *Mornings in Jenin* opens with a prelude set in Jenin in 2002, as Amal faces an Israeli soldier's gun. How does this prelude set the scene for the novel to come? Why does the novel open here, in contemporary Jenin, rather than at the beginning of the Abulheja family's story? Why do you think the author wanted the reader to know in the prelude that the main character was "an American citizen"?
2. Discuss the dual traditions of land and learning in the Abulheja family. Which members of the family seem to value land over education, and vice versa? In which family members do these two traditions come together? What common values do all members of this family share? How do these values compare to the values of farmers or of those who in another way live "close to the earth" in other countries?

3. The boyhood friendship between Hasan and Ari Perlstein is “consolidated in the innocence of their twelve years, the poetic solitude of books, and their disinterest in politics” (9). What do Hasan and Ari learn from each other? Considering that Palestine had historically been a country where people of all three monotheistic religions lived in relative harmony, do you think such friendships between children like Ari and Hasan were unusual then? Could two children like Hasan and Ari have become friends in a later time period? Why or why not?
4. In Jenin, the early morning “was a time and place where the hope of returning home could be renewed” (41). What rituals take place in the early morning hours? What is the significance of the title *Mornings in Jenin*?
5. Find scenes in the novel when family strife and political strife intersect. What are some problems that the Abulheja family faces day-to-day? Which family conflicts are caused by the political situation, and which seem common to families in all parts of the world?
6. Discuss the series of events that lead to Ismael’s new life as David. What connections can be drawn between Moshe’s kidnapping and Israel’s actions toward the Palestinian people? What wounds are healed when David discovers his real identity?
7. Hasan tells his daughter, “Amal, with the long vowel, means hopes, dreams, lots of them” (72). What hopes and dreams does Amal’s name suggest for the Abulheja family, and to what degree is she able to fulfill them? How do her hopes and dreams change when she calls herself “Amy” in America?
8. After surviving a week underground during the 1967 conflict, Amal denies knowing Dalia. Why does she renounce her mother? What are the consequences of Amal’s “disgraceful lie” (74)?
9. Haj Salem tells Amal, “We’re all born with the greatest treasures we’ll ever have in life. One of those treasures is your mind, another is your heart” (133). How does Haj Salem’s speech influence Amal’s decision to go to school in Jerusalem? Explain why Amal considers his words “the greatest wisdom ever imparted to me by another human being” (133).
10. Amal and Yousef both lose the people they love most in the attacks on Lebanon in 1982. How do brother and sister react differently to their tragedies, and why? How does this tragedy drive them further apart, instead of closer in their grief? How do you think Amal’s reaction might have been different had she not been pregnant?
11. Amal associates Dalia’s stoic behavior with a line of her mother’s advice: “Whatever you feel, keep it inside” (204). When does Amal follow Dalia’s example, and when does she break from it? How does Amal’s behavior with her daughter, Sara, resemble Dalia’s mothering? Discuss how Amal comes to the following realization: “Dalia, Um Yousef, the untiring mother who gave far more than she ever received, was the tranquil, quietly toiling well from which I have drawn strength all my life” (274).

12. Consider the Israeli characters within *Mornings in Jenin*: Ari Perlstein, Moshe, Jolanta, and David's sons. How do their experiences compare to the experiences of the Abulheja family? What do these Israeli voices add to the novel?
13. What layers of meaning can you find in the title of part III, "The Scar of David," which was the original title of the book?
14. On page 270, when David asks if Amal still sees him as an abstraction, she thinks, "No... You and I are the remains of an unfulfilled legacy, heirs to a kingdom of stolen identities and ragged confusion." What do you think Amal means by this? How do you see this statement in the context of the Palestinian struggle?
15. In their final conversations, as tanks roll through Jenin, Amal explains many of her hardships to her daughter, Sara. Why did Amal grieve "three thousand times" on September 11th (300)? How was Amal's experience similar and different from the widows' of 9/11? How did Sara misinterpret her mother's grief at the time?
16. Nearly all of the characters in this book are transformed in one way or another by personal and international events. How are the transformations of Moshe, Dalia, Amal, and Yousef similar and how are they different? Of them, who undergoes the most dramatic change?
17. Why does the novel end with words from Yousef, who lives in exile? What mood does Yousef's perspective create at the end of the book? Is it a surprise to learn that Yousef had not driven the bomb truck into the U.S. embassy in 1983? Considering that the PLO fighters who were exiled to Tunis in 1982 lost their families in the Sabra and Shatila carnage and none chose to respond with violence, why do you think the author chose this ending? What is the significance of the chapter title "The Cost of Palestine"?
18. If at all, how has this story changed how you view the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? Did you learn things that surprised you?
19. In the chapter where the story comes full circle to the prelude, how do you think Amal can face this soldier holding a rifle to her head with "a mother's love and a dead woman's calm" (305)? In this same chapter, consider the following passage in the context of how you think of soldiers and war, whether in your own country or elsewhere:

The power he holds over life is a staggering burden for so young a man. He knows it and wants it lifted. He is too handsome not to have a girlfriend nervously waiting for his return. He would rather be with her than with his conscience . . . But he has never seen his victim's face. My eyes, soft with a mother's love and a dead woman's calm, weigh him down with his own power and I think he will cry. Not now. Later. When he is face-to-face with his dreams and his future. I feel sad for him. Sad for the boy bound to the killer. I am sad for the youth betrayed by their leaders for symbols and flags and war and power.

Suggested reading

Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*; Sandy Tolan, *The Lemon Tree*; Jean Said Makdisi, *Teta, Mother, and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women*; Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*; Ibtisam Barakat, *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*; Sari Nusseibeh, *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life*; Rajah Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*; Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*; Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*; Elizabeth Laird, *A Little Piece of Ground*.

Susan Abulhawa was born to refugees of the Six-Day War of 1967. As a teenager she moved to the United States, where she grew up in the foster care system of North Carolina. She graduated from Pfeiffer University then completed a master's degree in neuroscience at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine. She is the founder of Playgrounds for Palestine, Inc. (www.playgroundsforpalestine.org), an NGO that builds playgrounds for Palestinian children in the occupied territories and in refugee camps elsewhere. Abulhawa has contributed essays to anthologies and to the *New York Daily News*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, among other publications.