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Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

A Place for Us

A Novel

by *Fatima Farheen Mirza*



SJP for Hogarth | Hardcover | 978-1-5247-6355-8 | 400 pages | \$27.00

Also available in e-book format and as an audio download

“As Marilynne Robinson has done with Protestants and Alice McDermott has done with Catholics, Mirza finds in the intensity of a faithful Muslim family a universal language of love and anguish that speaks to us all.” —Ron Charles, *Washington Post*

about the book

As an Indian wedding gathers a family back together, parents Rafiq and Layla must reckon with the choices their children have made. There is Hadia: their headstrong, eldest daughter, whose marriage is a match of love and not tradition. Huda, the middle child, determined to follow in her sister’s footsteps. And lastly, their estranged son, Amar, who returns to the family fold for the first time in three years to take his place as brother of the bride. What secrets and betrayals have caused this close-knit family to fracture? Can Amar find his way back to the people who know and love him best?

A Place for Us takes us back to the beginning of this family’s life: from the bonds that bring them together, to the differences that pull them apart. All the joy and struggle of family life is here, from Rafiq and Layla’s own arrival in America from India, to the years in which their children—each in their own way—tread between two cultures, seeking to find their place in the world, as well as a path home.

A Place for Us is a book for our times: an astonishingly tender-hearted novel of identity and belonging, and a resonant portrait of what it means to be an American family today.

about the author

Fatima Farheen Mirza was born in 1991 and raised in California. She is a graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and a recipient of the Michener-Copernicus Fellowship.

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— discussion questions

1. At the opening of the story, readers learn that Amar has been away from his family for three years. What does he say he might be able to convince himself of now that he has returned for his sister Hadia's wedding? Is he ultimately successful in this? What has kept Amar from seeing his family during this time and how does he feel upon his return?
2. Explore the theme of belonging. To what do the main characters wish to belong? Does the novel suggest what it means to belong? Which of the characters struggle with this and why? What makes them feel as if they do not belong? Are they able to overcome this? If so, how?
3. Layla leaves her home in order to make a new home with Rafiq in the United States following their arranged marriage. What does the novel reveal about the experience of immigration and the American Dream? What obstacles does Layla face as she tries to make a new life? What must she give up in order to do so? What does she try to bring with her or preserve from her old life?
4. Why does Layla tell her children the story of the black stain that can cover a person's heart? What effect does it have on the children? What does the novel suggest about guilt, shame, and forgiveness? Does the novel ultimately seem to support or refute the notion that people have a chance for redemption—either in this life or a next life?
5. Consider the structure of the novel. Why do you think the author made the decision to reveal the story in a nonlinear fashion? What might the disorder of the events in the book reflect or reveal about the characters and the major themes of the book?
6. The characters in the story often misunderstand one another. What seems to cause these misunderstandings and are they ever corrected? What secrets do the characters keep from one another and how does this secret-keeping affect their relations? Do the characters ultimately ever come to know one another better?
7. Why do you think that the author chose to tell the story from multiple points of view? Was there any one point of view that you feel stood out among the various voices? If so, why? Was there one character that you related to more than the others? How do you think that your response to the story would be different if it had been told from a single point of view?
8. The characters in the book are subjected to racism. What do they fear and what precautions does Rafiq say that they should take in the days after 9/11? Why does Amar feel that his father is hypocritical and what does he ask his father to do at this time? Does his father grant his son's request? What does this cause Rafiq to think about that he had never thought about before? What does Rafiq now believe is "his fight" in life? How does Rafiq respond to Amar's assault at school? Were you surprised by his response?
9. Explore the theme of faith. What role does faith—or the absence of faith—play in the lives of the characters? In what do the characters have faith? What traditions are important to them and why? How does Hadia characterize her faith?
10. Why do Amar and Amira hide their budding relationship? How are they found out and how do Amar's parents react to the discovery that the two have been communicating? Were you surprised by their response? Why or why not? How does the discovery impact Amar and Amira's relationship and alter the course of their lives?

11. Explore the theme of betrayal. What examples of betrayal does the book present? Who betrays whom and what motivates them to do this? In what ways do the character betray themselves?
12. What was Hadia's "private hope" for her life (102)? Do her dreams come true? What role does she imagine her ancestors having in this?
13. Why does Hadia decide to forgo her engagement and refuse any proposals of arranged marriage? Although she loves her husband, what does she fear about her marriage to Tariq? At her wedding, what does she pray for?
14. Amar accuses his parents of being hypocritical when it comes to their reactions to his choices in life. Would you say that he is correct? How does Rafiq respond to the news that his daughters are not going to accept arranged marriages? Later, why does he say that he has changed his mind?
15. As the story unfolds readers learn that several of the characters feel responsible in some way for Amar's departure. What role does each believe they played in driving him away or preventing his estrangement? Who or what is ultimately to blame for the fracturing of the family? Do you think that Amar's estrangement could have been avoided somehow? If so, how?
16. At the conclusion of the story, it is Rafiq's voice that readers hear last. Were you surprised by this choice? What does Rafiq have to say in the final part of the book? What does he feel was his biggest mistake? Did these final moments change your understanding of who Rafiq is? Did it alter the way that you saw any of the other characters?
17. What message does Rafiq ask Abbas to pass on? When all is said and done, what is it that Rafiq most wants his son to know? What would Rafiq tell Amar if he came back?
18. In an interview for *The Guardian*, the author dispelled the misconception that the title *A Place for Us* is a nod to the song "Somewhere" from *West Side Story*. Why do you think then that the author chose this particular title for the book? What might it signify? Likewise, what major themes and motifs might it predict or reflect? Do you feel that it is an apt title? Why or why not?

— about this guide's writer

JE BANACH is a senior member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Workshop. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than seventy literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.

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