

Book Club Discussion Guide



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What Strange Paradise

By Omar El Akkad

About the authors:

OMAR EL AKKAD is an author and a journalist. He has reported from Afghanistan, Guantánamo Bay, and many other locations around the world. His work earned Canada's National Newspaper Award for Investigative Journalism and the Goff Penny Award for young journalists. His writing has appeared in The Guardian, Le Monde, Guernica, GQ, and many other newspapers and magazines. His debut novel, American War, is an international bestseller and has been translated into thirteen languages. It won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award, the Oregon Book Award for fiction, and the Kobo Emerging Writer Prize, and has been nominated for more than ten other awards. It was listed as one of the best books of the year by The New York Times, The Washington Post, GQ, NPR, and Esquire, and was selected by the BBC as one of 100 Novels That Shaped Our World.

Source: Publisher's website: (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

About this book:

More bodies have washed up on the shores of a small island. Another over-filled, ill-equipped, dilapidated ship has sunk under the weight of its too many passengers: Syrians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, Lebanese, Palestinians, all of them desperate to escape untenable lives in their homelands. And only one has made the passage: nine-year-old Amir, a Syrian boy who has the good fortune to fall into the hands not of the officials but of Vanna: a teenage girl, native to the island, who lives inside her

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own sense of homelessness in a place and among people she has come to disdain. And though she and the boy are complete strangers, though they don't speak a common language, she determines to do whatever it takes to save him.

In alternating chapters, we learn the story of the boy's life and how he came to be on the boat; and we follow the girl and boy as they make their way toward a vision of safety. But as the novel unfurls, we begin to understand that this is not merely the story of two children finding their way through a hostile world, it is the story of our collective moment in this time: of empathy and indifference, of hope and despair--and of the way each of those things can blind us to reality, or guide us to a better one.

Source: Publisher's website: (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/>)

Discussion Questions:

1. How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored...?
2. Describe the main characters—personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities.
 - Why do characters do what they do?
 - Are their actions justified?
 - Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship).
 - How has the past shaped their lives?
 - Do you admire or disapprove of them?
 - Do they remind you of people you know?
3. Are the main characters dynamic—changing or maturing by the end of the book? Do they learn about themselves, how the world works and their role in it?

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4. Discuss the plot:

- Is it engaging—do you find the story interesting?
- Is this a plot-driven book—a fast-paced page-turner?
- Does the plot unfold slowly with a focus on character?
- Were you surprised by complications, twists & turns?
- Did you find the plot predictable, even formulaic?

5. Talk about the book's structure.

- Is it a continuous story...or interlocking short stories?
- Does the time-line move forward chronologically?
- Does time shift back & forth from past to present?
- Is there a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints?
- Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way he or she did?
- What difference does the structure make in the way you read or understand the book?

6. What main ideas—themes—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use symbols to reinforce the main ideas? (See our free LitCourses on both Symbol and Theme.)

7. What passages strike you as insightful, even profound? Perhaps a bit of dialog that's funny or poignant or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there's a particular comment that states the book's thematic concerns?

8. Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?

9. If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?

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10. Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

Source: *Lit Lovers* (<http://www.litlovers.com>)