

Fremont Great Books Discussion Questions

“Gravel Heart” by Abdulrazak Gurnah

July 30, 2022

Main Characters: Salim, Munira, Masud, Saida, Amir, Asha, Hakim

1. In Shakespeare’s “Measure for Measure”, a prisoner is condemned with the phrase, “Unfit to live or die. O gravel heart.” In this book, what character does the “gravel heart” refer to, and why? Who is the prisoner?
2. Referring to their mutual love of classic literature, Salim tells his father, “That is how you and I come to know so much of the world; reading about it from people who despise us.” Do you think either of them have internalized this bigotry? What would it be like if all the books available were written by Muslim Africans?
3. Early in the story, what reason did you suspect had caused the separation of Salim’s parents?
4. Were there any sociocultural differences you found confusing? How did the “cut, prune, incinerate” policy affect Masud’s family after the 1964 revolution?
5. Did Salim’s boyhood behavior seem normal to you? How did he adapt to British culture and to the changes in social class?
6. How did Salim’s feelings toward Amir change?
7. Why do you think Salim didn’t return to visit his mother? Is she acting out of love by hiding her secrets from him?
8. Salim’s father tells him, “As you travel, keep your ear close to your heart.” Does Salim use this advice? What do you think it means?
9. Were you surprised by the sudden end of Salim’s relationship with Billie?
10. Does the book’s structure work? Specifically: the epistolary chapters, Masud’s nightlong soliloquies at the end, and the “Measure for Measure” plot retold by Salim.
11. At the end of Masud’s narration we finally learn why he left his family. How did you react to the choices Saida made?
12. What did you think of the ending of the book?

Additional Resources:

Article from The New Yorker about the impact of the author’s Nobel Prize:

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-impact-of-abdulrazak-gurnahs-nobel-prize>

Interview with the Nobel Prize Academy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu1TqDhnLlw>