EIU Reads 2013 Facilitator’s Guide
The Submission by Amy Waldman

Homework Questions

1. Choose a character from the novel (Chair of the Committee, Paul Reuben; Architect, Mo; family member of a victim: Claire, Asma, or Sean). Why does your character believe his/her position is correct? How does that position change throughout the course of the novel? How do you view this character’s actions and motives? Why?

2. The novel illustrates several viewpoints on patriotism and what it means to be an American. Describe 3 viewpoints expressed in the novel and discuss with which you most agree. Why?

3. What does the novel indicate about the role of the media? What is the impact of a free press in the information age with news feeds coming out 24/7? Describe three ways in which the media influences the final decision about the memorial and the resulting response.

Additional Questions

1. What do you think the purpose and message of a national memorial should be? Would you have voted for the Void or the Garden?

2. Can you think of other examples in recent history where people fought about a memorial?

3. Why is Claire so enamored of the Garden design as opposed to the Void? Why did the other jurors want the Void? What makes this decision so difficult even before the architect’s name is revealed?

4. As Claire tries to explain the tragedy to William (and, in a way, to Penelope), what does she discover about her own beliefs and feelings?

5. Mo is under considerable pressure to give the “right” reasons when asked why he entered the competition, but he defies simplistic answers. What does his design communicate on its own? For any creative work—including novels—should the author’s biography matter to us? Do you think he was obligated to explain himself and his design?

6. Why does Mo refuse to discuss his beliefs, his reasons for submitting his design, or his personal viewpoints? Why doesn’t Mo just answer their questions and give them what they want? Is it better in some cases not to insist on your civil rights?

7. How did your reactions shift as Sean’s story unfolded, especially as he struggled with conflicting feelings after pulling Zahira’s scarf? Is bigotry excusable if it’s coming from someone whose loved one was the victim of a horrific crime? What are the limits of a survivor’s rights? What drives him to pull her headscarf? Why does he apologize to her later?

8. Sean Gallagher is an active leader of the survivors group against the Memorial. In a conversation with Chairman Paul Rubin, he asks, “what about my rights, the families’ rights? The victim’s rights? Don’t they count for anything?” (p. 129) Rubin responds by saying “emotions are not legal rights.” What are the rights of survivors?

9. Compare Asma Anwar’s life to Laila Fathi’s. What are the similarities in their struggles to fit in?

10. Asma’s memories of Inam are her private inheritance, and she must rely on translators to convey her messages in English. Did anyone in the novel have a truly accurate understanding of her suffering? How was her mourning experience different from Claire’s and Sean’s? What common emotions do all of the novel’s survivors share? Why does she insist on speaking?

11. What is Asma’s place in the story? What is the meaning of the reference to Asma being like a “performance act” (p. 243) — that her comments were so perfectly timed, yet not all were even translated?
12. Many of the characters desperately want someone to blame for their loss. The final line of chapter 22, referring to Alyssa, reads, “She is responsible.” Ultimately, who is responsible for the tragedies depicted in the novel?

13. As the situation became heated, people looked for someone to blame to avoid controversy. Who was blamed? How were the characters changed as a result?

14. A journalist, Amy Waldman had special insight into Alyssa’s world. What does the novel tell us about the role of the media (exploited by all parties involved) and the impact of a free press in the information age?

15. How does Waldman’s use of language enhance the emotional power of the book? The central theme of this book is “submission” as the title suggests, in just about every sense of the word. Discuss the title’s significance. What are the parallels or differences between submission to one’s values and faith, and submitting to what is expected? To what (and to whom) must the characters submit? Who are the novel’s most and least submissive characters?

16. An uproar erupted in 2010 when Park51, a community center housing a mosque, was proposed for construction two blocks from Ground Zero. What does this conflict—and the one described in The Submission—suggest about how 9/11 might have transformed American society? (Note: Amy Waldman began writing The Submission several years before Park51 was announced.)

17. The fear, intolerance, ignorance, and prejudice that emerge over the course of the novel represent a cross-section of America two years after 9/11. How has public feeling changed since 2003? Can you think of other, more recent controversies that have erupted around similar issues?

18. The American values of safety, justice and peace were wounded nationwide, as the characters prove. What will it take to heal our nation?

19. In the final “dialogue” between Claire and Mo, orchestrated by Molly and William, is anything resolved? What does the closing image of a cairn show us about the heart of the novel, and the role of future generations in resolving history?

20. Why does the author take readers 20 years into the future, where “the country had moved on, self corrected, as it always did, that feverish time almost forgotten” (p. 287)? How did Claire’s and Mo’s final decisions during the Memorial uproar affect the outcome of their lives?

21. What groups in American society are represented by the main characters in the novel? Which character(s) did you find most compelling? What could the main characters have done differently to prevent friction and violence and promote a better outcome?

Glossary of Terms Used in the Novel

**Adhan:** Islamic call to prayer

**Allah-hu akbar:** God is the greatest

**Assalamu alaikum:** an Islamic greeting that means “peace be upon you”

**Wa’alaikum asalam:** “peace be upon you too’ reply to greeting

**Kalimah:** Islamic holy verse and declaration of faith: (p. 28) “La ilaha illa allah, Muhammad rasulullah” means “there is no God but Allah, and Mohammad (peace be upon him) is his messenger.” Also known as shahada.

**Eid-al-Adha:** (p. 256) Islamic celebration that marks the Hajj Pilgrimage in Mecca

**Salat:** Daily prayer

**Ablution:** (p. 28) cleansing and washing of oneself in preparation for prayer

**Muezzin:** (p. 281) the person who leads the call to prayer (adhan)

**Muslim:** one who submits to the will of God

**Jihad** (referred throughout the book): a holy struggle; usually means a struggle within a person, for the sake of God (example: fasting, praying, etc.)

**Ramadhan:** Islamic holy month of fasting

In Islam, “submission” to the will of god and the religion is very important. One can submit oneself within the five pillars of Islam, which are: daily prayer, to make Hajj pilgrimage, to fast during the month of Ramadhan, to recite the Kalimah (shahada), and to give zakat (alms, obligatory money donation)
Best Practices

Many faculty who have led Eastern Reads! discussions have found discussion carousels provide a great way to get all of the students involved. All ideas are shared and no one person can control the outcome of the discussion. You’ll need some sort of flip-chart or large area of paper (e.g., butcher paper), a way to hang these around the room, and magic markers for each student to use.

1. Using 20 students as an example, create four mixed groups by having people count off from one to four (making four groups of five students each).

2. Clearly label and number four discussion questions that you want to use on the flipcharts/paper posted around the room.

3. The students each go to their assigned number (1-4), read the question at their station, and individually record their responses directly on the flipchart/paper. Be sure to emphasize that this is NOT about group consensus but about individual responses. If a student agrees with another’s ideas, they should indicate their agreement by placing a check mark next to that idea.

4. Give each group about 5 minutes to read the question and record responses. At the end of five minutes, signal each group to move clockwise to the next station.

5. Participants should read responses already on the flipchart/paper and individually check off the ideas they agree with. They should also add their own ideas to the list. Continue the rotation until all four stations have been visited by all groups.

6. Have each group return to their original question, give the group time to read the new responses and check those with which they agree. Ask each group to give a 1-2 minute report of the top four or five answers to their focus question (ranking can be done by tallying check marks).

The entire process (including 5 minutes for welcome and explanation) should take approximately 45-50 minutes. This activity is great because it puts most of the participation on the students and not on the discussion leader(s).

There are also other, less structured ways of leading discussions. Many faculty simply sit around in a circle and ask students to contribute to the discussion. This usually works well if you have a group of active students. The student Prowl Leaders who can be there to help you (if you request one) can help enliven the discussion. The freshmen often feel more comfortable relating to someone closer to their own age.

Debates are also a great way to engage students that require very little input from the discussion leader. For a novel, you may want select groups to champion the viewpoint of a particular character or group represented by the character (For example, Mo could represent architect/designers or Muslim Americans).

Web Resources

EIU Reads Web site:  http://castle.eiu.edu/~eiureads/\n
Official Web Site for the Novel:  http://www.thesubmissionnovel.com

Public Books’ Virtual Roundtable contains 4 essays looking at different aspects of the novel:  http://www.publicbooks.org/fiction/virtual-roundtable-on-amy-waldmans-the-submission

Seattle Reads’ guide offers a biography and interview with the author, discussion questions (some copied here), and additional resources:  http://www.spl.org/Documents/audiences/adults/SeattleReads/2012-WaldmanToolbox.pdf

The Web Site of the actual 9/11 memorial in NYC:  http://www.911memorial.org/visit

Background on the actual memorial and the competition:  http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_September_11_Memorial_%26_Museum

9-minute video, narrated by Tom Hanks, of the re-building of WTC and memorial:  http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzpyheliUcE


September 11 digital archive:  http://911digitalarchive.org

Information on Islamic Gardens:  http://bridgingcultures.neh.gov/muslimjourneys/collections/show/6