

The questions below are designed to be discussion starters to enhance your group's conversation around *Displaced Persons*. Feel free to take them wherever they lead.

But first, a note from Joan.

It might enrich your group's discussion to know something about how the book came to be. As you might imagine with a collection of short stories, I didn't set out to write a book; rather, I wrote the stories singly, one at a time, over a period of some thirteen years. Most were published in literary journals along the way; several won individual prizes. It was while I was working on two novels, both proving resistant, both in need of the occasional hiatus, that I thought of assembling the stories into a book.

This gave rise to two goals: to locate a cohesiveness in the stories that would justify their existing between the same two covers beyond my simply being their author; and second, to use the opportunity to make something of even greater heft, a book that would be more than the sum of its parts. Which is part of the joy of creating a short story collection. Not only do the stories get a second life if they've been published before, but the author gets a chance to make an entirely new work, a book that stands separate and apart from the individual stories--and must also stand on its own.

The result is in the architecture of the book: two halves, East and West, each consisting of seven stories and roughly equivalent in length. This wasn't planned out in advance. Rather, it came about as I put the stories together and saw I had an equal number set in Israel and in the States, although the final stories in the collection are not the same ones I was first working with. I jettisoned one story from each section--because I did not think they were good enough--and wrote new ones to replace them. I was also aiming with the new stories to add extra vitality to each section with narratives that used voices and tones that differed from those already included. Finally, I chose a title, *Displaced Persons*--the name of one of the stories--that I thought could serve to loosely hold them together, as if under one big tent.

That said, it's not necessary to know this "behind the scenes"--or, as one of my teachers used to say, how the garment was sewn together--to enjoy the stories. While I wanted to create cohesion for the book, it is still a collection of individual stories, meant to be encountered individually, each its own world. And so it is my hope that you, the reader, will feel with each story that you've lived for a time in a singular world, without regard for any overarching theme or idea, and were transported, if for only a short time, into the lives of others.

Discussion Starters

1. Consider the stories concerning people who are living far from their countries of origin (major characters, minor characters, people mentioned only in passing): "The Baghdadi"; "Displaced Persons"; "Remittances." What countries are these people from and why, according to the stories, are they in Israel? What do you take from these stories about how life in Israel is for these foreigners? What do you make of the line the American narrator in "Remittances" imagines her well-to-do Israeli acquaintances thinking about the overeducated Russian cleaning woman the narrator has invited in to get a reprieve from the heat and whose cleaning-woman status the American finds troubling: *This is how it is. Our parents and grandparents were immigrants too. They did their share of dirty work. Now it's someone else's turn.*
2. The narrator in "Displaced Persons," an American PhD student who thought she'd write a "a pithily incisive chapter" about each African refugee she worked with "laced with shimmering insights into what it means for thousands of traumatized 21st century refugees to seek shelter in a country defined by thousands of traumatized refugees of the 20th," hasn't been able to write a word because "the thought of reducing their lives to case studies for the purpose of netting me a university degree seems obscene." Why would the narrator think that writing up such case studies is "obscene"? Do you agree? Disagree? Why do you think the narrator wants to stay in Israel?
3. Sexual violence lurks --and in one story is featured prominently--in the background of three stories: "Displaced Persons," "Remittances" and "Wild Animals." What is the sexual violence in each story? How does it differ in each one? How are those experiences talked about--or not talked about--by those who endured them or by others around them?
4. The constancy of the military in Israeli life is central to "The Eleventh Happiest Country" and "Beautiful Souls." What did you take from these stories about what it's like to be a soldier in Israel today? The two stories are strikingly different in tone. How did the different tones color your understanding of the soldiers' experiences? What did the titles of these two stories evoke for you?
5. "Bus," "Hunters and Gatherers," and "The Natural World" concern mothers and fragile sons. In each story, what did the mother do in response to the needs of her son? How did these mothers manage their own needs? How do you think the mothers in these stories went on with their lives after the events recounted?
6. Consider the opportunity for repairing relationships that's explored in several stories: "Wonder Women," "The Innocent," "Roots," "The Natural World," and "After." What is the repair that could be made in each of these stories? What did you take from them about why attempting repair can be so hard to do?

7. In "The Book of Splendor," religion, poetry, and mental illness seem in some ways to be connected, the boundaries between them blurred. Do you think that's true? How might immersion in religion or religious study lead to mental instability-- or vice-versa? What about immersion in poetry? What do you make of the custom Nathan recalls, that *The Zohar, The Book of Splendor*, a mystical text, "was so dangerous no one was allowed to open its pages until they reached the age of forty. Because if you did, you could go crazy. Cross over to the other side. Even die."

8. Some of the stories, though serious, use humor: "The Innocent," "Roots," "The Eleventh Happiest Country." What are the humorous elements in these narratives and what did they do for the stories, in your opinion?

9. The stories in the collection are told in a range of voices--first-person and third-person, from the perspectives of teenagers and octogenarians, middle-aged divorcees and post-army guys, mother and fathers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers. They're set in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Los Angeles and Queens, on a road trip to Idaho and a visit in Washington, D.C. How did this mix of voices and tones, settings and characters affect your experience of reading the stories? Which story or stories moved you most? Bothered you most? Can you explain why?

10. Consider the stanza from the Billy Collins poem "The Present" that appears as an epigraph at the beginning of the book. How might these lines apply to *Displaced Persons*? What did those lines mean to you when you first read them?

