

Book Group Guide

***You Should Pity Us Instead* by Amy Gustine**

1. At the end of “All the Sons of Cain” R’s mother sees men praying on the beach. She hopes “her boy is among them.” Is this her son? Or the boy she has been staying with in Gaza? Do you feel it could possibly be both? Why or why not?
2. What is the significance of the fact that R’s mother adopted him after an earthquake in “old Byzantium” (modern-day Istanbul, Turkey, formerly called Constantinople) left him unidentified and homeless?
3. In “Unattended” what do you make of the ending? How is this memory “saving Joanne’s life” today? “As Joanne jogged up the sidewalk, turning her back on those other, motherless children, pain spiked again, this time in her right ear, and the world fell away. All except her mother’s face, where she is sure she saw relief, which today, even more than then, saves her life.”
4. I started the story “You Should Pity Us Instead” with a question: what would it be like to be married to someone like Christopher Hitchens or Sam Harris (public, virulent, vocal atheists and critics of Christianity) while living in a typical Midwestern neighborhood? As I developed the story, I ran across an article in the newspaper about an uncontacted tribe which inspired the Elizabeth and Adoo half of the story. Combining the two storylines is, in my view, what gives the story its energy and tension. How did you react to the different situations Molly and Elizabeth are in? Do you see parallels or only differences?
5. Molly and Elizabeth are both struggling with raising children to believe, or not, the same things they do. How important is it to you that your children share your beliefs about religious matters? To what extent do you feel that religious beliefs define our personality and interactions with others? Is it easy or difficult for you to be close friends with someone whose beliefs are very different from yours?
6. I wrote “An Uncontaminated Soul” as a reflection on what is behind the behavior of animal hoarders. Do you think Lavinia is abusive to her cats? Why do you think she has so many? What do you think the title means? How does the *Myth of Sisyphus* connect to Lavinia’s cats?
7. In “Prisoners Do” Mike and Shayla have very different experiences with intimacy, loyalty and sacrifice. How did you feel about the affair they are having? Was it excusable? Do you feel the story was more or less successful because it was told from both of their perspectives?

8. Names play a role in “AKA Juan.” What do you think the variations of Lawan’s name mean to him? To his family? Do you judge people based on their names? Why or why not?
9. In “AKA Juan” Lawan observes that when he is carrying Gloria without someone watching he feels differently than the way he feels when his siblings are watching. Why do you think he feels differently depending on who is watching? Does this issue of being observed play a part in Lawan’s relationships with anyone else in the story?
10. In “Coyote” Cory is afraid of many things she fears will hurt her son. One of those things is the coyote who is coming into her yard, but she also fears the neighbors. In what ways are the neighbors similar to and different from the coyote. Do you see a meaningful distinction between her fear of one and her fear of the other? How do you feel toward Cory? Sympathetic? Frustrated? Scornful? Pitying?
11. In “Coyote” what significance is there to the fact that the story ends with her husband asking, “What do you think they’re talking about over there?”
12. In “The River Warta” we discover at the end what final blow prompted Caroline to flee to America. Is she actually telling this story to Dobry? If so, why do you think she chooses to tell him, only a son-in-law, this traumatic, embarrassing event?
13. “When We’re Innocent” is a mysterious story to me. There’s some kind of alchemy between Brian and Obi that gets to me every time. How did you feel about their connection? About Brian as a “pervert”? About Obi as a “guilty man”?
14. I had written eight of these eleven stories over the course of several years before I thought about their common thread. One day, while considering whether or not they would make a good collection, it occurred to me (newsflash!) that the parent-child relationship was central in every story. With that in mind, I wrote the last few stories. Was it obvious to you when you read the collection that the stories shared this relationship as a central feature? Looking back now, do you see it or do you feel that there is some other common thread that stands out more?
15. If you had to write a whole collection about a particular relationship (spouses, boss-employee, grandparent-grandchild, friends, neighbors, co-workers, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, doctors and patients, etc.) which relationship would it be and why? Can you spin out any initial ideas about this relationship that the stories could explore?