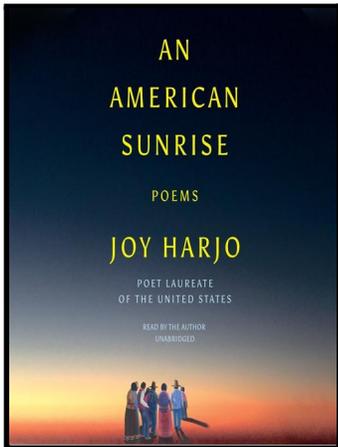


An American Sunrise Reader's Guide



BOOK BUZZ



An American Sunrise: Poems
By Joy Harjo
W.W. Norton & Company

[A W.W. Norton & Company Reading Group Guide](#)

Discussion Questions

1. *An American Sunrise* opens with a map of the Trail of Tears. “May we all find the way home” (p. xv), Joy Harjo writes, as she embarks on a return to her ancestral homeland. How does this map resonate throughout the book? Does Harjo find her way home, metaphorically, by the end of the book?
2. In “Break My Heart,” the first poem in the book, Harjo writes: “Be who you are, even if it kills you./ It will. Over and over./ Even as you live” (p. 4). How does this notion of the difficulty—and importance—of being ourselves play out throughout the rest of the poems in the book?
3. *An American Sunrise* contains several pages of informative prose on the history of Native cultures and their oppression in the United States. How does the telling of this history in a more straightforward way than poetry complement the poems surrounding the prose?
4. The concept of generations, and what is passed on and repeated throughout them, comes up frequently in the book. What do you think Harjo is trying to say about what we inherit and what connects us?



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5. Harjo often writes the universal into the particular, tackling huge subjects like loss, aging, and displacement with an eye on the past, the future, and the earth itself. In “Washing My Mother’s Body,” she writes: “The story is all there, in her body, as I wash her to prepare her/ to be let down into earth, and return all stories to the earth./ My body memories rise up as I wash” (p. 32). What are some other examples of this approach in *An American Sunrise*?
6. In “Rising and Falling,” Harjo writes: “Human poetry is a restless soul/ And does not always know what it holds” (p. 35). What do you think the poet means by this? Do you think she is unaware sometimes of everything she’s saying? As a reader, did you find yourself surprised by what you felt and discovered in moving through the work?
7. Harjo includes Emily Dickinson’s famous poem “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” in her collection and then adds at the bottom of that page, “Emily Dickinson was six years old when Monahwee and his family began the emigration to the West” (p. 60). What do you think Harjo is getting at by including the poem, and the historical marker after it?
8. Harjo adopts a call-and-response construction in her poem “Advice for Countries, Advanced, Developing and Falling” (p. 79). Why do you think she chose this form and how do you think it adds to what she is saying in the poem?
9. Thinking more about form, how do Harjo’s varied forms add to the book’s energy and impact?
10. Harjo writes a lot about memory, both collective and personal. In “Becoming Seventy,” she writes: “All memory bends to fit. We become poems” (p. 94). How does Harjo illustrate this bending and becoming throughout *An American Sunrise*?

About this Author

Joy Harjo is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. She is the author of nine poetry collections and one previous memoir, *Crazy Brave*. Named Poet Laureate of the United States in 2019, she lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she is a Tulsa Artist Fellow.



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