

The Blue Between Sky and Water: A Novel
By Susan Abulhawa

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, a sprawling and beautiful novel about four generations of Palestinian women living in a refugee camp in Gaza.

About this book

The Blue Between Sky and Water opens with a meditation from the yet-to-be-born Khaled, the novel's narrator and a member of the fourth generation of a resilient Palestinian family. Khaled introduces readers to his great grandmother Um Mamdouh, a single mother to siblings Mamdouh, Nazmiyeh, and Mariam. Um Mamdouh was considered crazy by the Beit Daras farming village until the community realized that she could communicate with the djinn—specifically a spirit named Sulayman. It is Sulayman who warns the community of the impending Israeli invasion and saves Mamdouh and Nazmiyeh's husband as the men are fleeing to Gaza. Although Nazmiyeh had escaped earlier with the rest of the women, she braves the treacherous path back to the village to rescue her younger sister Mariam, who had hidden herself in the house's water well. Before they can flee, Israeli soldiers find the two sisters, shooting eight-year-old Mariam and gang-raping Nazmiyeh, leaving her for dead. Nazmiyeh, who is emotionally and physically broken, only musters the strength to survive because Mariam's spirit promises her that they will be together forever and that Nazmiyeh will have a daughter, whom she must name Alwan.

In the years that follow, the brash and headstrong Nazmiyeh becomes a passionate and wise matriarch. She continues to seek out Mariam's guidance in challenging times: when she gives birth to her first child—a son with gray eyes that remind her of one of her rapists; when her only surviving sibling moves to Egypt, Kuwait, and then America; when she gives birth to son after son but no daughter; when her first born, Mazen, is captured and imprisoned by Israeli forces because of his role in the resistance. And yet, there are also joyous times as the family creates its home within the refugee camp—when women seek Nazmiyeh's advice on matters of passion and sex; when Nazmiyeh finally gives birth to Alwan after eleven sons; when she holds *jomaa ghada* each week, immersed in the laughter, tears, and fights of her many sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren.

Woven within the chapters about Nazmiyeh's growing family is the heartbreaking story of Nur, the granddaughter of Nazmiyeh's brother Mahmoud. After the death of both his wife and only son, Mahmoud spends years fighting his daughter-in-law until he wins sole custody of Nur. Mahmoud, whom Nur affectionately calls her "jiddo," is her best friend. However, before the two are able to rejoin the family in Gaza, Mahmoud passes away, and five-year-old Nur is sent to live with her mom and her boyfriend, who inherit—and appropriate—Nur's trust. Nur endures several years of verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse before she is rescued by her Tio Santiago and caseworker Nzinga. Despite her emotional hardening and isolation as she moves from foster home to foster home, Nur continues to excel academically, becoming a psychotherapist who helps teenagers confront childhood trauma.

It is this specialty that finally brings Nur to Gaza in order to help Alwan's ten-year-old son Khaled—the story's narrator—who is suffering from Locked-In Syndrome, unable to move or communicate. Though Nazmiyeh and Alwan don't initially recognize Nur, she quickly becomes a part of their tight-knit circle through her work with Khaled and his doting young sister Rhet-Shel before the epiphany finally occurs.

A beautiful reflection on womanhood and family, *The Blue Between Sky and Water* is a testament to the power of love and survival.

For discussion

1. What is the significance of the book's title? Why is the novel called *The Blue Between Sky and Water*? Consider the significance of Mariam's song that is repeated by various characters throughout the book.
2. Why did Abulhawa choose Khaled as her narrator? How might the novel read differently if Nazmiyeh had been the narrator?
3. What is the significance of using first-person narration in novels, compared with third-person (or in combination)? Consider issues related to the "right to narrate," narrative ownership, and narrative appropriation.
4. Do you believe the supernatural aspects of this story, or do you feel there are logical explanations that the characters might not perceive or believe?
5. Why do you think Abulhawa chose to include otherworldly elements in this novel?
6. To what extent are the settings (Beit Daras and Gaza) reflected in the characters themselves?
7. Why is Mazen the only one of Nazmiyeh's sons who is given a name and individual identity? What is the importance of his story?
8. Khaled affects many characters in the novel, even before he is actually born and after he is suffering from Locked-In Syndrome. How does he affect people in different ways? Specifically consider Mariam, Nazmiyeh, Alwan, Nur, and Rhet Shel.
9. After her jiddo dies, Nur lives with many different "families," but the two characters who are most like family to her are Nzinga and Tio Santiago. Why is this? What do Nzinga and Tio Santiago provide for Nur that she is unable to find anywhere else in the United States?
10. Khaled comments that although Nur is the one among them with the most education, security, opportunities, and freedoms, she is also "the most devastated person we knew." What do you think about this statement? Do you think it's better to grow up in difficult circumstances but surrounded by the love and care of a large family, or to grow up in a country of plenty, but alone, without love or family?
11. Why does Alwan become furious with Nur when she begins her affair with Jamal? What other aspects of Palestinian culture does Nur struggle with because of her Western upbringing?
12. How does the novel's structure—jumping back and forth between time, places, and characters—affect your reading and understanding of the work as a whole?
13. The majority of the characters in *The Blue Between Sky and Water* are female. What truths about womanhood does the novel reveal?
14. Why is there such an emphasis on colors in the novel?
15. Nur's jiddo once told her, "Stories matter. We are composed of our stories. The human heart is made of the words we put in it." Why does he place such an emphasis on stories? What role do

individual stories play within the greater framework of this novel? Do his words ring true in our own world? Why or why not?

16. Many of the characters in the novel are in conflict with themselves. While certain characters understand their internal struggles clearly, other characters are less aware—or even conscious—of their inner battles. Discuss some of the internal conflicts you see at work in the novel and how they work to drive the story forward.
17. Of all the relationships in the novel, which do you find most moving? Why?
18. Considering the unremittingly fraught situation in Gaza, what takeaways about the land and the Palestinian people might Abulhawa be trying to convey through her fiction?

Suggested reading

Susan Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin*; Ibrahim Nasrallah, *Time of White Horses*; Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun*; Suad Amiry, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*; Mourid Barghouti, *I Saw Ramallah*; Elias Khoury, *Gate of the Sun*; Ibrahim Fawal, *On The Hills of God*; Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*; Mahmoud Darwish, *The Butterfly's Burden*

Susan Abulhawa was born to Palestinian refugees of the 1967 war. Currently living in Pennsylvania with her daughter, she is a human rights activist and frequent political commentator. She is the founder of Playgrounds for Palestine, an organization dedicated to upholding the Right to Play for Palestinian children living under Israeli military occupation and in refugee camps elsewhere. Her first novel, *Mornings in Jenin*, was an international bestseller, with translations in twenty-six languages.