



"Masterful." -HALA ALYAN, award-winning author of Salt Houses

NO LAND



TO

LIGHT *a novel*

ON



YARA ZGHEIB

AUTHOR OF THE GIRLS AT 17 SWANN STREET



READING GROUP GUIDE

No Land to Light On

Yara Zgheib



This reading group guide for *No Land to Light On* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Yara Zgheib. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.



Introduction

Exit West meets *An American Marriage* in this breathtaking and evocative novel about a young Syrian couple in the throes of new love, on the cusp of their bright future...when a travel ban rips them apart on the eve of their son's premature birth—from the author of the “absorbing page-turner” (*People*) *The Girls at 17 Swann Street*.

Hadi and Sama are a young Syrian couple flying high on a whirlwind love, dreaming up a life in the country that brought them together. She came to Boston years before chasing dreams of a bigger life; he'd landed there as a sponsored refugee from a bloody civil war. Now, they are giddily awaiting the birth of their son, a boy whose native language will be freedom and belonging.

When Sama is five months pregnant, Hadi's father dies suddenly in Jordan, the night before his visa appointment at the embassy. Hadi flies back for the funeral, promising his wife that he'll be gone for only a few days. On the day his flight is due to arrive in Boston, Sama waits for him at the airport, eager to bring him back home. But as the minutes and then hours pass, she continues to wait, unaware that Hadi has been stopped at the border and detained for questioning, trapped in a nightmarish limbo.

Worlds apart, suspended between hope and disillusion as hours become days become weeks, Sama and Hadi yearn for a way back to each other, and to the life they'd dreamed up together. But does that life exist anymore, or was it only an illusion?

Achingly intimate yet poignantly universal, *No Land to Light On* is the story of a family caught up in forces beyond their control, fighting for the freedom and home they found in one another.



Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. The novel opens with a description of the migratory patterns of red knots (sandpipers), and the executive order of the 2017 Muslim travel ban. How do each of these set the tone for the novel?
2. Sama comes to the United States by choice as a student, but Hadi comes as a refugee. Discuss how their experiences differ prior to leaving Syria, and once they arrive in the US.
3. On page 38–39, Hadi and Sama discuss the migratory patterns of red knots. How is the journey of this endangered bird and “how far they will go to find home” similar to Hadi, Sama, or any immigrant or refugee's journey?

4. Sama chooses Naseem's name because it is their "heritage... a name that recalled the country you and I had come from." Discuss the importance of names and how they can link people across generations or geography.
5. Both Sama's and Hadi's mothers supported them leaving Syria—albeit very differently. What were their reasons for wanting their children to leave? Discuss how they were similar and different.
6. When Sama is being discharged from the hospital, the theme of home—where it might be and what home looks like—comes up. Discuss the idea of what home is and what home means for Sama, Hadi, and Naseem.
7. We see a glimpse of Hadi's younger years juxtaposed with the story his lawyer, Paul, tells him about a young man getting pizza with his friends. Why is it important to see the differences between this young Syrian man and the memories of an American man?
8. Paul advises Hadi to "trust the system" while waiting to get his US state ID. How did trusting the system help and hurt Hadi throughout the story?
9. Professor Mendelssohn becomes a father figure to Sama—first as a professor by encouraging her in class, then by visiting her in the hospital with food and books, and later by advising her to leave the US. After hearing how he came to the US, do you believe he sees himself in Sama and her family? Why do you think he suggested she reunite with Hadi outside of the US?
10. The differences in Sama's and Hadi's experiences come to a head when Hadi asks, "What the hell do you know about being trapped?! What do you know about suffering, Sama?" How has their suffering differed? Do you think it was fair of him to pose this question? Why or why not?
11. Sama continually says her reasoning for not wanting to leave the United States is that she has earned her ability to live there through scholarship and yet she begins to have doubts when she says, "I know this street and don't belong on this street. I don't belong in Syria either." This is one of the first times we see Sama waver after Hadi goes missing. What finally convinces Sama she needs to leave with Naseem?
12. In the end, Hadi and Sama find freedom and home with each other rather than in a specific city or country. Much like for the red knots, there is uncertainty for Sama, Hadi, and Naseem. Why do you think Sama and Hadi finally make the choice to find a different country from which to get visas?



Enhance Your Book Club

1. According to the CDC, in 2019, preterm birth affected one out of every ten infants born in the United States. *No Land to Light On* does not shy away from the realities and traumas of families with children in NICUs. The topic of preterm birth is more widely discussed now, as it appears in literature, news stories, and personal accounts of celebrities who share their experiences through social and traditional media. Discuss how the conversation about preterm births has evolved and how people are working to erase the stigmas surrounding traumatic birthing experiences.
2. Much of Sama's and Hadi's goals are rooted in the idea of the American Dream, which has been used as a device in many works of literature. Oftentimes, characters striving for this dream are met with insurmountable circumstances that prevent them from achieving their goal as is the case in *No Land to Light On*. Examine other novels that tackle this idea over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, including those considered classics and others published within the last few years. How has the idea of the American Dream changed in both literature and in everyday life? Is it more optimistic now or in earlier works?

A Conversation with Yara Zgheib

The migration patterns of red knots is a thread that runs throughout *No Land to Light On*. What drew you to these birds and why did you want to tie them into the narrative?

I still remember the first time I saw these birds. I had just immigrated to the United States, it was my first autumn in Massachusetts, and I was feeling quite uprooted, adrift. One evening, just at sunset, the sky was suddenly full of red knots. I knew nothing about them, not even their names. I just saw little birds, beautifully fragile, impossibly tiny, and then someone told me they were migrating to Tierra del Fuego, nearly seven thousand miles away. I fell in love with them. They gave me courage, these brave, intrepid little birds. I found a nobility in their journey, like that of all immigrants.

There is an emphasis on food, on both their taste and smell, such as when you describe Sama's and Hadi's parents cooking or the first time Hadi and Sama have an American donut. Why did you focus on these specific senses?

Our most vivid experiences are colored, shaped by taste and smell; these sensations give texture and realness to a moment. Later, the same smell or taste acts like a trigger for the memory. Think of Proust's madeleine. Or of favorite childhood meals. Culture is also intricately tied to food. Every immigrant from anywhere comes with an emotional suitcase full of spices, herbs, dishes that only a certain mother or grandmother knows how to make, in some loved and missed and far-off place.

How much of *No Land to Light On* is factual and how much is fiction?

I am not Syrian, and I was not affected by that specific travel ban, but I know the insides of ICUs well, and the insides of interrogation rooms. I know what it is to lose visas, jobs, friends, all my savings, my home, and get on a plane with my entire life packed into one suitcase. But I also know how light that feels, how vast the sky and world are. It's a beautiful feeling.

Beyond your personal experience, was there specific research that went into writing this novel?

Much research was conducted on the 2017 travel ban—the circumstances surrounding it, its execution, the fates of those impacted by it—as well as the civil war in Syria, the refugee process in the United States, the operations of the US embassies. Lawyers were consulted, as well as human rights experts and activists, journalists who had been on site in US airports when the travel ban was enacted, reports and testimonies, etc.

So much of this story is about finding home and what it means to the characters. What does home mean to you?

E.E. Cummings writes:

I carry your heart with me (I carry it in my heart) I am never without it.

He says it better than I could.

Do you have a next project in mind? And, if so, what is it?

This next book is the one I have been writing, in my heart, in my journals, on scraps of paper and the backs of train and plane and metro tickets, for more than ten years now. I am madly in love with it and hope you will be too. I can tell you it is set in Paris...

