

Discussion Questions for "Digging to America" by Anne Tyler

Below are two sets of discussion questions. Each take a slightly different look at *Digging to America*.

1. Talk about the significance of the book's title.
2. Early in the book Connie Donaldson and Maryam Yazdam commiserate about family gatherings: "All those people who know you so well, they think they can say just anything" Connie remarks. "And really they don't know you so well" adds Maryam. How does the book enlarge this truism? Have you found it to be true in the life of your own extended family?
3. Much of the book is told from Maryam's point of view – how does this shape our experience of the novel?
4. The plot of the book does not turn around a single large event but incorporates all the trials and pleasures of family life—children's milestones, celebrations, illness, death, relationships with friends and in-laws, courtship. Did you find the plot engaging? At what point in the book did you feel the plot culminated – that "ah ha" moment we all look for in a good novel?
5. Digging to America offers a look at the difficulties immigrants have in accommodating their new American identities and also the difficulties Americans have in accepting and welcoming those from other cultures. How is this explored in the novel? What are your family's stories about immigration?
6. Maryam claims that "Americans are all larger than life. You think that if you keep company with them you will be larger too, but then you see that they're making you shrink; they're expanding and edging you out." Talk about this statement in relationship to the novel. Do you think, in the context of your experience, there is any truth in this statement? Why or why not?
7. What is the definition of "an American?"
8. Do you think Digging to America presents an accurate picture of international adoption? Talk about experiences you or those close to you have had with international adoption.
9. Celebrations in Digging to America often incorporate traditions from other cultures or entirely new "invented" traditions. Maryam is upset when the Donaldsons borrow Iranian traditions ("Our food, our songs, our holidays. As if he's stealing them!"). Bitsy embraces Korean traditions as a way of honoring her child's birth culture. What do their celebrations, and reactions to them, tell us about the people in the novel? What is your favorite family celebration--either invented, traditional or adapted from another culture? What does that celebration tell us about you?

More Questions

1. The book's title has at least two interpretations. What are they and how do they reflect Tyler's central concerns?
2. How does Tyler's use of humor illuminate the novel for the reader?
3. How does the shifting point-of-view allow the reader numerous opportunities to understand several of the central characters, adults and children?
4. Maryam contends that "Americans are larger than life..." and are always "...expanding and edging you out." How is this claim relevant to the events of the novel?
5. How important is the role food plays in the world Tyler presents?
6. What does Maryam mean when she refers to the "immigration tango"?
7. How does the idea of "outsiderness" influence the actions of Maryam and other characters?
8. How would the knowledge of Iranian politics in, say, the third quarter of the 20th century help a reader understand the attitudes of the Iranian families featured in the novel?

9. Does the novel celebrate diversity or does it suggest (with G. K. Chesterton) that “being good is wearing nose rings where nose rings are worn”?