

Reading Group Guide

1. “History has failed us, but no matter.” How does the opening line reflect the rest of the book—and do you agree? ‘
2. In a way, Sunja’s relationship with Isak progresses in reverse, as her pregnancy by another man brings them together and prompts Isak to propose marriage. How does Lee redefine intimacy and love with these two characters?
3. What does “home” mean to each of the main characters? Does it ever change? In what ways does a yearning for home color the tone of the novel?
4. How do courting and marriage alter from one generation to the next?
5. Compare the ways in which the women of this novel—from Sunja to Hana—experience sex.
6. How much agency and power do you think Sunja really has over her life?
7. Much is made of Sunja’s fading beauty, as well as the physical appearance of all the women who surround her. What does this reveal about society at this time? Do you see this emphasis on female beauty reflected in present-day culture?
8. Throughout the book, characters often must choose between survival and tradition or morality. Can you think of any examples that embody this tension?
9. Many of the main characters struggle with shame throughout their lives, whether due to their ethnicity, family, life choices, or other factors. How does shame drive both their successes and failures?
10. The terms “good Korean” and “good Japanese” are used many times throughout the book. What does it mean to be a “good Korean”? A “good Japanese”?
11. Compare the many parent-child relationships in the novel. How do they differ across families and generations? What hopes and dreams does each parent hold for their children—and are these hopes rewarded?
12. Even in death or physical absence, the presence of many characters lingers on throughout the book. How does this affect your reading experience? How would the book have been different if it were confined to one character’s perspective?
13. Why do you think the author chose Pachinko for the title?