



**BOOK CLUB KIT**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- 1.** Malak, Kees, and Jenna's deep friendship is one of unshakable love and honesty. Discuss why you believe Kees and Malak's differing views about chasing tradition, family, and community approval was the reason for their fracture.
- 2.** These three women are working to hold on to the different parts of themselves—which sometimes contradict one another—to create an authentic life. Discuss your own experiences in having to negotiate and reconcile conflicting parts of your own identity.
- 3.** Discuss Kees and her sister Saba's differing views on marriage, love, and relationships.
- 4.** How do Jenna's views on love and sex stand in contrast to Kees and Malak's? How do you think Jenna's mother's revelation toward the end of the novel would have influenced her behavior had they had these conversations earlier?
- 5.** Describe the ways in which Malak and her life change once she moves to Cairo. Why do you think this change had such an impact, and how does the city affect her sense of self?
- 6.** What did the author mean by the line, "It never fails to amaze her that the real C-word for white people is culture and once it's mentioned people compete to show their respect for it or their knowledge of it"? Discuss whether that resonates with you and your experiences.
- 7.** What were Jacob's motives when he went to Kees and told her the news of Harry's eventual proposal. How do you feel about his involvement in this moment?



8. By the novel's end, all three women have gone through a difficult situation or traumatic event independently. In what ways do you see that being alone impacted their decisions in these situations?

9. Discuss the scene between Kees and her father before the nikah and how that affects Kees's feelings about proceeding to marry Harry? How do you think this impacted your appreciation of her parents' relationship—the sometimes silent but resounding support for each other?

10. Discuss the way the novel's depiction of friendship resonated with you. What does Malak, Kees, and Jenna's relationship say about the bonds of female friendship, as well as regrets, forgiveness, and chosen family?

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The June 2022  
Read With Jenna  
Book Club Pick!



**CULTURE IS THE REAL C-WORD.**

**#THESEIMPOSSIBLETHINGS**

# A CONVERSATION WITH SALMA EL-WARDANY

## **What inspired you to write *These Impossible Things*?**

I did my master's thesis on the representation of Muslims across Western literature and the conclusion just irritated me so much I had to write this book. After studying literature from the UK, the U.S., and Australia for twelve months, I couldn't find me and my friends anywhere. Muslim women didn't exist outside of the narrative of honor killings and terrorism and I couldn't relate to any of the characters I read about. I wanted to see myself and my friends. I wanted to see characters who just happened to be Muslim instead of it being the sole focus of the work. The novel is made of intricate layers that build on each other. Was there a moment where all of these disparate strands and characters finally came together, or did the shape of the narrative come to you fully formed?

## **Jenna, Malak, and Kees have very different personalities. What drew you to these particular characterizations and how they work together for the story you were trying to tell?**

I don't know if it's a northern thing, but me and my friends all grew up teasing each other. My girlfriends are whip-smart, sharp, and hilarious, and I wanted to put all of that into the characters in the book. I wanted to convey that sense of deeply rooted bonds, the kind that allows you to really laugh at your friends while loving them entirely, which is where lots of their traits come from.

## **Who are some of your favorite writers, and did they influence the way you wrote *These Impossible Things*?**

Hanya Yanagihara and Lisa Taddeo are the queens of my heart. I would walk to the ends of this earth to read what they write. I wish I could say they influenced my writing, but I wouldn't be so presumptuous. When I'm writing I have a strict rule of not reading anyone else's work because I specifically don't want to be influenced by their work or my longing to write as well as the people I'm reading.

## **These scenes where Malak is in Cairo are immersive and lush with description. What is your connection to this city, and what made you want to write Malak there?**

Well, I was born in Cairo and have a lot of family there, so it's home. I also lived there for a few years after university and it was some of the best and worst days of my life. Cairo is a place that can drive you mad if you let it, but if you don't fight her, and if you give in to the chaos, she'll make you feel more alive than you ever have been. That's Cairo for me.

Malak goes through such a transformative period in the novel and I wanted that transformation to happen far away from home and everything familiar, because I think you can't grow into yourself fully when tied to old things and old places.

**What were some of the harder moments to write in *These Impossible Things*? What moments were easier to get down on the page?**

The hardest moments are the mundane details that have to be included to let the reader know the facts. What month it is, the weather, the logistical information that gets a character from A to B. I find them dull and uninspiring. It's a little bit like doing the laundry, a boring task that just needs to be done.

The easiest parts were the saddest parts. Writing out pain and heartbreak and fear comes worryingly easy to me. I have always joked about my wasted heart, but perhaps it came in handy here.

***These Impossible Things* is an honest exploration of the intersectionality of women of color. What drew you to writing the two main love interests as white men?**

Ha, that's a story for another book. However, the short answer is I grew up watching friend after friend fall for men who were white non-Muslims, and it always ended in heartbreak. I wanted to tell that story, but also the story of what happens when you decide to break all the rules and stay with that man.

What life could have been like for many Muslim women if they'd stayed with the men they loved, and perhaps it wouldn't have been the catastrophe we'd all been raised to believe it would be.

**This novel is a love letter to friendship. How do you feel about the way female friendship is portrayed in media today and what did you want this novel to achieve in the way it represented Jenna, Malak, and Kees's bond?**

We're getting better at portraying female friendships but we're still a long way off. Growing up the residing stereotype was still that women are catty and competitive with one another, when in truth, women save each other every day. I would still be on a bathroom floor somewhere crying if it hadn't been for the women in my life. I owe them so much of who I am and what I've been able to achieve. It was crucial that the heartbeat of the novel was those friendships and how when their ties dissolve, life can begin to unravel. Every woman needs her girlfriends, more than she needs men and her family. And that's what I wanted to convey.

**Did you learn something new about yourself in the process of writing *These Impossible Things*?**

That I can write a novel a lot quicker than I thought I could and, really, I should get on with writing lots more.



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# MORE RESOURCES FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB

Listen to the playlist now on



"Ride It" - **Regard**

"The Truth About the World" - **Andrea Marie**

"Surrender" - **Natalie Taylor**

"Paperweight" - **Joshua Radin & Schuyler Fisk**

"Kuch Kuch Hota Hai" - **Jatin-Lalit, Udit Narayan & Alka Yagnik**

"Forgive Me Friend" - **Smith & Thell**

"What Can I Say" - **Brandi Carlile**

"Chances" - **Dido**

"Kefak Anta & Hello" - **Noel Kharman, Fairuz**

"Ho Naa Ho" - **Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy & Sonu Nigam**

"9 Crimes" - **Damien Rice**

"Hallelujah" - **Haim**



## "Where are you from?"

Navigating intersectional identities like Jenna, Malak and Kees in *These Impossible Things* can be difficult. Watch Salma El-Wardany's TED Talk, where she shares her idea of celebrating our identity by reconciling parts of ourselves that might seem at odds.

# THESE IMPOSSIBLE THINGS NOT-SO-OLD FASHIONED

Though we know how much mint tea is drunk in the novel, too many mocktails are lazy variations on a virgin mojito. Toss that soggy mint sprig in the trash and try this refreshingly modern spin on tradition instead.

Recipe adapted from *Dishoom: From Bombay with Love*.

Serves 2

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 Tbsp lapsang souchong loose leaf tea
- 1/2 cup dark brown sugar
- 3/4th cup water
- bay leaf
- 1" slice of ginger
- non-alcoholic orange bitters
- Orange peel for garnish

## DIRECTIONS

Make the simple syrup by combining sugar and water, boil until sugar fully dissolves. Add tea and bayleaf and simmer on low 5 min. Turn off heat and let steep 8-15 minutes depending on desired strength.

Strain syrup into a clean jar/bottle. Muddle ginger in bottom of cocktail strainer, add ice, then add lapsang syrup.

Shake and strain into old fashioned glass over ice. Add 2-3 dashes of bitters on top and garnish with an orange peel.

## INTERNATIONAL MENU IDEAS

Give a nod to Egypt, Pakistan, and the U.K. with these delicious party foods perfect for sharing at your next book club gathering.

- Baklava
- Hummus & Veggies
- Iced green mint tea
- Pita Chips & Cucumber-yogurt dip
- Medjool date & shortbread cookies
- Falafel bites
- Figs
- Parathas & cilantro chutney
- Aloo samosas
- Mango Burfi



# QUIZ:

## Which THESE IMPOSSIBLE THINGS character are you?

### 1. What's your idea of the perfect day?

- A) A sunny day in the park with friends
- B) Being with your loved ones who see you for who you really are
- C) A great night out with lots of dancing and delicious greasy drunk food

### 2. What describes your ideal job?

- A) A 9-5 that gives you enough money to focus on what really matters: having a good time.
- B) Working towards a better world for underprivileged communities
- C) A job that plays to your strengths so you can shine brightest

### 3. How would you resolve an argument with your bff?

- A) Reason with them and give them space
- B) Tell them the truth, even if it hurts their feelings
- C) Make a joke and try not to fight in the first place

### 4. What qualities do you look for in a partner?

- A) Similar belief systems and your family loves them
- B) Kindness
- C) Sexual chemistry

### 5. Where would you most want to live?

- A) Cairo, Egypt
- B) London, UK
- C) A big mansion in the countryside



## RESULTS:

**Mostly A's:** You're Malak. You're a steadfast friend and romantic partner who feels everything deeply. You find strength in being connected to your roots and your community.

**Mostly B's:** You're Kees. You're have a sharp tongue and an inexhaustible debater. But, you're the most loyal friend and want the best for all people. Even though you have high expectations of everyone around you, you set even higher expectations for yourself.

**Mostly C's:** You're Jenna. You're the life of the party, eager for fun and pleasure. You make everyone feel at ease with your sense of humor and positive outlook on life. Your friends are what makes you feel whole.