

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Early in the book, Shelley says, “Someone once told me that people reveal everything essential about themselves at their very first meeting. The problem, of course, is that you can’t easily distinguish the important details from the insignificant ones.” What do we learn about Shelley, Martin, and Mai when we meet them for the first time? In what ways do first meetings reveal important details about that person’s character? In what ways do we miss essential qualities?

2. What do Shelley and Mai think of each other in the beginning of the book? How does their relationship change as their understanding of one another deepens? In what ways do they support each other? In what ways do they fail each other?

3. What kind of roles do secondary characters--Gladys and Marcy, Dr. Penzi, Mrs. Huyen, Abe and Theo—play in the book? In what ways are they memorable? In what ways do they exert influence on the story?

4. Infertility leads Shelley to make drastic changes in her life. Do you admire her perseverance? Does her single-mindedness bother you? Do you believe that the inability to have a child could have such a dramatic effect?

5. How do Shelley’s ideas about motherhood change or evolve once she actually meets Hai Au? How does the novel give us a sense of the peculiar experience of a mother and child meeting for the first time?

6. Mai’s first language is Vietnamese and she speaks very broken, heavily accented English. However, when the novel reveals Mai’s thoughts, her English is fluent and very articulate. How does the book manage these contradictions and what is the effect of this type of narration?

7. In what way do setting and background enrich the novel? Did your ideas about Vietnam or its culture or history change as you read the story? Are there any particular images from the book that stand out in your mind?

8. The theme of death permeates the book. Shelley and Martin run a funeral home. Mai’s niece dies in Vietnam. Martin loses a dear friend during the war. How do these events affect the story? How does the author counterbalance the sadness of these deaths with themes of life and hope?

9. What moments in the novel surprised you or made you anxious about what might happen next? How does the book create suspense? How is information revealed to the reader in a surprising or suspenseful way?

10. If you were speaking to someone who hadn't read *If You Lived Here*, how would you describe its style? What other books have you read that use language in similar ways? What is the tone of the book and how is that tone created?

11. How is this a story of the continuing effect of the past on the present? Both Mai and Martin are controlled to a great extent by events that took place in Vietnam years ago. Is it possible to put the past behind you? In what ways do you think Mai and Martin are able to move forward by the end of the book? How have events of the novel affected their sense of the past?

12. The book is structured with chapters alternating between the points of view of Shelley and Mai. What does this structure contribute to the story? How would the book have been different if only Shelley or Mai had told the story, or if the story had been told by a third-person narrator? Suppose Martin had been the storyteller. ...then what?

13. Telling a story through the perspectives of two characters poses special challenges for an author. What do you think the challenges of telling a story in this way are for an author? How does the author solve some of these problems?

14. How does the novel address the issue of guilt and forgiveness? How does guilt, and the possibility of forgiveness, influence the ways in which people interact with each other in the book?

15. How does the book hint at what will happen to these characters in the future? What does the author do to give you a sense of various possibilities without actually telling you what will happen? Did you feel that you could imagine what might happen in future, even if it isn't clearly explained?