

## ***Book Group Discussion Guide for The Golden Land***

1. *The Golden Land* opens with the following epigraph from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi: “The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear.” What does this statement mean to you? Do you agree? Why did the author choose to open the novel with this epigraph?
2. Etta had a complicated relationship with her grandmother. In what ways are the two women alike? In what ways are they different? Do you think Ahpwa would approve of Etta’s decision to return to Myanmar? What advice might she give Etta regarding Jason or Shwe?
3. Early in the novel, Etta finds a box of broken marionettes in Ahpwa’s closet. How might the marionettes have come to be in such a state, and why is it so important to Etta to mend them? What role does the old puppeteer, U Soe Htet, play in Etta’s journey? How does he influence Jason’s journey?
4. The story of Queen Supayalat and King Thibaw is a touchstone for both Etta and Parker. What does this story mean to the two sisters? Why is Etta so obsessed with the royal couple? What does she learn from Queen Supayalat?
5. Etta and Parker are seven years apart, giving them a different set of childhood memories and experiences. How do these different circumstances influence their worldviews? How does the relationship between the two sisters evolve over the course of the novel?
6. As a child, Etta wishes she had a nickname like Parker does. Her father points out that she already has two full names, one English and one Burmese. The country also has two names—in 1989 the military changed the name from Burma to Myanmar, but many people continue to call it Burma. What power do names have over identity? Does your name affect how you think of yourself or how you think others view you?
7. Etta has conflicting feelings about Jason and Shwe. What prevents her from fully committing to Jason? What is it that she seeks from Shwe? Which of the two men did you root for? Explain why.
8. Parts 1 and 2 of *The Golden Land* are written in alternating chapters that are twenty-three years apart and go back and forth between Boston and Burma/Myanmar. How does this dual timeline add or take away from the story? Why do you think part 3 remains only in the present?
9. In chapter 3 of part 2, Etta muses, “Writing a love letter is like tying a bit of your soul to a balloon and letting it go. Once the envelope is sealed, the words cease to belong to you.” Do you agree? Have you ever written a love letter? Do you wish you could reread that letter now?
10. Who is your favorite character? Who is your least favorite? What advice do you wish you could give Etta, Jason, Parker, Shwe, or any of the other characters that populate *The Golden Land*?
11. Shwe’s blog entry about a hydrogen explosion at the Yangon opening of an American fast-food restaurant galvanizes Etta into action. Knowing what she’s doing is morally questionable, she uses her Western heritage and legal background to intimidate a middle manager of the fast-food chain into helping the burn victims. Why does she care so much about this case? Is it okay to abuse your power if it’s for a good purpose? What’s the difference, if any, between abusing your power and using your influence?
12. In the final chapter of the novel, Etta reflects, “Maybe being part Burmese is enough for me, maybe even just right. If *America the Beautiful* taught me anything, it’s that being Burmese is not a box to be opened or closed; culture is not hard and fixed but a function of the breath that passes through us day in and day out, an amalgam of everything we touch and experience, past, present, and future.” Do you agree? What does it mean to be from some- where? Can you belong to more than one culture?

13. How much did you know about the history of and political situation in Myanmar before reading *The Golden Land*? Did the novel inspire you to seek out more information about the country? In what ways is learning about history and culture through fiction different from reading a history or other nonfiction book?

14. How did you feel about the ending? Were you satisfied that the main conflict was resolved, or did you want more? What do you think happens to the characters after the novel ends?

15. The author lived in Myanmar for six years but is not Burmese. Does this change how you perceive the novel? Why do you think she wrote this book? Under what circumstances, if any, is it okay for authors to write about cultures that are not their own? Explain.

---

*Discussion questions from The Golden Land by Elizabeth Shick by permission of the University of Nebraska Press.  
© 2024 by the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska.*