

NOMAD Book Club Guide

*This reading group guide for **Nomad** includes an introduction, information about the AHA Foundation, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

Nomad is the portrait of a family torn apart by the clash of civilizations. But it is also a touching, uplifting, and often funny account of one woman's discovery of America. *Nomad* is Ayaan Hirsi Ali's second memoir. Her first, *Infidel*, recounts her coming-of-age in Somalia and her escape from an arranged marriage to live in Holland. *Nomad* recounts the many turns her life took after she broke with her family, and how she struggled to throw off restrictive superstitions and misconceptions that initially hobbled her ability to assimilate into Western society. Through stories of the challenges she has faced, which represent the challenges faced by most Muslim immigrants to the West, she shows the difficulty of reconciling the contradictions of Islam with Western values. She writes movingly of her reconciliation, on his deathbed, with her devout father, who had disowned her when she renounced Islam after the attacks of September 11. While Hirsi Ali loves much of what she encounters in America, she fears we are repeating the European mistake of underestimating radical Islam. She calls on key institutions of the West—including universities, feminists, and Christian churches—to enact specific, innovative remedies that would help other Muslim immigrants to overcome the challenges she has experienced and to resist the fatal allure of fundamentalism and terrorism.

THE AHA FOUNDATION

In response to ongoing abuses of women's rights in the name of religion and culture, activist and academic Ayaan Hirsi Ali and her supporters established the AHA Foundation in 2007 as a charitable organization to help protect and defend the rights of women in the West. Through research, the dissemination of knowledge, and outreach, the Foundation aims to combat several types of crimes against women, including the abridgement of the education of girls, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, honor violence, and honor killings. For more information, please visit www.theahafoundation.org.

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Compare Hirsi Ali's relationship with her absent father with that of her mother. In what ways does Hirsi Ali's father seem to identify with her more than her mother does? Why do both parents label their own daughter as foreign to them when she renounces her family and her faith? What does Hirsi Ali's break from her family suggest to you about her character? What do you think her family's perspective would be on her?
2. How does Hirsi Ali's account of her nomadic childhood—particularly with respect to her interactions with her older brother, Mahad—reveal the divergent ways in which boys and girls in tribal Somali families are treated? To what extent do you agree with Hirsi Ali's contention that the veiling of Muslim women perpetuates misogyny and sexism?
3. How does the "consensus society" in Holland that Hirsi Ali encounters, first as an immigrant and later as a member of Parliament, reveal important lessons to her about the nature of Dutch politics? (p. 104) How would you compare Dutch politics with politics in the United States? How does Hirsi Ali's own uncertain status as an immigrant relate to the failure of the Dutch government? How does her bittersweet departure from Holland mark Hirsi Ali's sense of herself as a nomad?
4. "Roughly 130 million women around the world have had their genitals cut" (p. 128). How does Hirsi Ali's position on the need to end genital mutilation of young girls resonate for you? Why does this procedure continue in many parts of the world, and why do grandmothers and mothers continue to enable it for their daughters? How does genital mutilation connect to the sexual politics implicit in tribal societies?
5. How does the fact that Hirsi Ali has to have round-the-clock security in the United States because of death threats against her make you feel about the points about freedom that she makes in *Nomad*? What in her writing do you think incites threats?
6. "Instead of affirming the value of tribal lifestyles, people in the West—activists, thinkers, government officials—should be working to dismantle them" (p. 213). How is Hirsi Ali's statement especially provocative in a society that appreciates cultural, religious, and racial diversity? Based on what you have

learned about tribal lifestyles from this book, do you agree or disagree with her remark?

7. "Modernity is a permanent state that replaces your former outlook. You can try to fight it, but it is irresistible" (p. 259). Why does modernity pose such a threat to the tribal way of life in countries like Somalia? How do technological advances threaten the old ways of life directly and indirectly?

8. Hirsi Ali writes movingly about herself and other Muslims who emerge from tribal societies to live in a globalized world. In what respects do fundamental issues like sex, money, and violence throw into sharp relief the challenges faced by immigrants who feel torn between adhering to their traditions and responding to the changes demanded by their new circumstances?

9. Of the many anecdotes that Hirsi Ali offers of her extended family (from her dying father to her unborn daughter), which have resonated most with you, and why? How might her own remarkable personal journey from that of a faithful, tribal Muslim girl in Somalia to that of an atheist political analyst in urban America illustrate the role that family plays in one's destiny?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. In *Nomad*, Ayaan Hirsi Ali writes a letter to her deceased grandmother and a letter to her unborn daughter. Neither addressee can read the letter Hirsi Ali is writing when she composes it, and both of her letters contain important information about her beliefs and feelings. If you could choose anyone in your family to write to—especially someone who couldn't read your words—a grandparent, a future grandchild, a future spouse—what would you write about? What information or feelings would you feel compelled to share, and why? You may want to reveal your letters, or the ideas behind them and their intended recipients, to your fellow book club members.

2. As an immigrant in Holland, Hirsi Ali was shocked to discover that her newly adopted country was willing to lend her money and shelter her until she could establish herself as a productive and financially independent member of society. How familiar are you with the immigrant experience in your country? Are any members of your family immigrants? From what countries and when did they immigrate? What aspects of their or your immigrant experiences seemed familiar with those Hirsi Ali encountered? You may want to share observations and recollections with fellow members of your book club.

3. The AHA Foundation, founded by Hirsi Ali and her supporters, constantly updates its website with news articles relating to issues discussed in *Nomad*. Go to <http://theahafoundation.org/category/news/> and choose some recent articles of interest. Use them to start a discussion with your fellow book club members on events happening today that directly relate to topics discussed in *Nomad*. Which topics seem to be most prominently featured in current events? What improvements, if any, are being made to better protect the rights of girls and women?