



What Is Written on the Tongue

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For readers of Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a transportive historical novel about finding morality in the throes of war and colonization

1 Historical fiction, particularly around the Second World War, is attracting lots of readers lately. What is it about historical fiction that is speaking to us right now?

2 *What Is Written on the Tongue* looks at unexplored aspects of the war and its aftermath — the life of an ordinary teenage boy under the occupation, and the colonial unraveling of Indonesia in its wake — to show the reader fresh facets of the conflict. The war in Indonesia has been called the Netherlands' Vietnam for its doomed senselessness and how much of what happened was silenced back in the homeland. Many of the characters in the book are unable to share their full story about either war. What did you think of the unspoken stories in the novel? How did they affect your reading of it?

3 The book interweaves what Sam is currently experiencing on Java with the occupation memories he begins to write down in his notebook, both stories rising to their crisis points at the same time. Did you enjoy this as a literary device? If so, what did you find effective about it?

4

Inner conflict creates enormous tension throughout the novel and no one is more tortured by it than Sam. He struggles to be a good man, to be a person his brother Leo could be proud of. But the war tears apart his understanding of what (and who) is right. His moral compass fails him as he fears he has failed Leo. At one point in Indonesia, Sam asks, “What are we, the fucking SS?” His story explores who we become when we begin to accept the unacceptable. We live in a safe country in peacetime and most of us don’t know how we might act if thrown into the cauldron of war. How does Sam’s response to events show the limits of the human psyche? How do his actions compare to those of Emma, the German farmwife trying to survive, or Father Pete with his reckless courage?

5

What Is Written on the Tongue has a rich cast of characters who are often not as Sam first sees them: his father; Rudy the German officer; Raj, his angry fellow soldier. Part of Sam’s maturation is his capacity to see that people can be many things at the same time and to accept his own nuances. Did you find this believable and satisfying? If so, what scenes most helped cast light on this, both for Sam and the people he interacts with?

6

What of Marcel, Sam’s boyhood best friend? What do you think of his transformation into guerilla soldier? Why do you think he felt driven to do this?

7

Despite the violence of war, there is much sweetness in this book — Sam’s relationship with the mute boy, Taufik, the grace of Sari, Darma’s quiet strength and the beauty of the land itself. Did this contrast heighten the poignancy for you?

8

Do you think that Sam learned what he needed about being a good man by the end?