

Passage West

BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Passage West can be characterized as an immigrant story, but it's also an old-fashioned Western, with horses and guns and a sheriff and a killing. What is the effect of juxtaposing these well-known genres, each of which comes with its own expectations and stereotypes?
2. Which stories get told and how they get told – as opposed to stories that remain hidden – is one context in which to understand Passage West. How do those untold stories, when they surface, reshape our understanding of a life, an event, an era, history?
3. The story deals explicitly with societal racism in the context of forbidden love and anti-immigrant tensions. How does love transcend, or fail to transcend, these tensions and the societal lines they draw? How does love, even forbidden love – awaken a sense of recognition, belonging, and home in an alien world?
4. Discuss the concept of “boundaries” – between countries and between people, and how it’s used in the novel.
5. “Writing” is highlighted throughout the novel. Newspapers articles convey what has been famously called the “first rough draft of history.” Some characters are not able to read and write, while others carry on a relationship solely through letters. Padma is a poet, yet cannot prove her literacy in order to enter the United States. What is the role that writing, in all its aspects, plays in the story? How is “writing” related to the notion of “story?”



6. The characters speak many different languages yet succeed in communicating. Some dialogue is conveyed “in accent.” When Ram finally acknowledges his love for Adela, he has succeeded in speaking Spanish. How do themes reverberate around “language” in the novel? How do themes reverberate around “language” in the novel?
7. Water – in the form of the ocean, as a river, as the boundary between countries, as rain, as irrigation for crops – appears again and again in the novel. Water once covered all the land in Imperial desert in prehistoric times. When new settlers came in 1904, a catastrophic flood ensued. In Karak’s view, sacred things may be placed in flowing water to be carried off. What does water signify?
8. The story portrays two Americas, or two different versions of what we think of as America....do you agree or disagree?
9. Discuss the ways in which Ram can, or cannot, ever be made “whole.”
10. Discuss how the novel deals with questions of truth. Who gets to define what the ‘truth’ is, or which version of events is understood as ‘truth’ - and the question, too, of a more private truth – like the truth of Ram’s love for and connection to Padma, whom he left behind, and the truth of his love for Adela that leaves him irrevocably changed.

