

Discussion Guide for The Great Divide by Cristina Henríquez

1. Which character's backstory or inner conflicts intrigued you the most, and why?
2. Discuss the ways in which Henríquez portrays the complexities of identity and belonging through characters like Ada, Francisco, and John Oswald.
3. If you could spend a day with one character from the novel, who would it be and what would you want to learn from them?
4. How does the novel challenge or reinforce common perceptions of the Panama Canal's construction and its impact on the local community?
5. Describe the contrasting values between Francisco and Omar, the father-son duo in "The Great Divide." Why does Francisco disapprove of Omar working on the Panama Canal, and what does the canal represent to each of them?
6. Have you ever experienced a life event that unexpectedly led you to a new place or situation, similar to the characters in the novel? If given the chance, would you make the same decision again?
7. "The Great Divide" explores various forces shaping Panama's future, including politics, power dynamics, community, faith, and family. Which force do you consider the most influential in the story, and why?
8. The cultural diversity depicted in the novel, from Ada's Barbadian heritage to Francisco's Panamanian roots, is an important factor. How does Henríquez navigate these cultural intersections and portray the characters' experiences authentically?
9. In what ways does the novel shed light on underrepresented voices and untold stories from history? Discuss the significance of highlighting these perspectives in literature.
10. Analyze the themes of injustice and resilience throughout the novel. How do characters like Ada and Francisco navigate adversity and strive for a better future despite facing significant challenges?
11. Esme, Omar's mother, plays a significant role despite her absence. How does Esme's presence resonate throughout the narrative, and do you believe it's possible to maintain a connection with someone who is physically absent?
12. Valentina expresses a deep attachment to her hometown, Gatún, reflecting on its significance in her life. Have you ever felt a strong connection to a particular place? What does the concept of "home" mean to you?

13. Francisco muses on the necessity of faith to envision the future. What do you think it takes to maintain hope for the future, and what are the consequences of losing that faith?
14. Consider the role of power dynamics and exploitation in the narrative. How do the foreign powers involved in the canal's construction impact the lives of local residents, and what does this reveal about broader issues of colonialism and imperialism?
15. Discuss moments of triumph and perseverance in the face of hardship. How do characters find strength and solidarity in times of struggle?
16. What is the significance of the novel's structure, including its use of multiple perspectives and shifting timelines? How does this narrative approach enhance or detract from your reading experience?
17. Identify recurring symbols or motifs in the story, such as the canal itself, sickness, and familial bonds. How do these symbols contribute to the overarching themes and character development?
18. Consider the role of storytelling within the novel. How do characters' personal narratives and family histories shape their identities and relationships?
19. What did you think about the complexities of relationships portrayed in the novel, from familial bonds to friendships and romantic connections. How do characters navigate loyalty, betrayal, and moral ambiguity in their interactions with others?
20. Molly's experience with her photographs highlights the theme of recording history. How does the novel comment on the recording and preservation of historical events? Can you identify other instances where this theme is explored?
21. Miller's treatment of the men under his charge raises questions of responsibility. To what extent do you believe Miller is accountable for Berisford's death, and why?
22. Marian reflects on John's preference for a potted orchid over a wild one. What deeper meaning does this hold for Marian, and how do other characters in the novel seek control or freedom?
23. Reflect on moments of ethical dilemma or moral ambiguity faced by characters throughout the story. How do their choices reflect larger societal tensions and power dynamics?
24. Discuss the significance of forgiveness and reconciliation in the novel. How do characters grapple with past traumas and seek redemption amidst personal and collective struggles?
25. Aside from the physical divide of the canal, what other divisions, whether physical or metaphorical, are present in the novel?

26. Explore the similarities and differences between Ada and Omar's situations, particularly in their family dynamics. How much common ground is necessary to truly understand someone?

27. Consider the contemporary relevance of the novel's themes, particularly in relation to issues of social justice, globalization, and environmental sustainability. How do the historical events depicted in the novel resonate with present-day challenges and movements?

28. Think about your own cultural and historical perspectives after reading "The Great Divide." How has the novel expanded your understanding of Panama's history and its broader significance?

29. Discuss the potential for literature to serve as a platform for amplifying marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives. In what ways does "The Great Divide" contribute to this broader conversation?