

AMERICANAH

# BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE



Parts 4-6



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NYC MAYOR'S OFFICE FOR MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT

The Center for the Professional Education of Teachers

**TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**

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Ways to use the

# BOOK CLUB

## READING GUIDE

One Book, One New York is the largest community reading program in the country, bringing together book-loving New Yorkers to read the same book at the same time. The Center for the Professional Education of Teachers, Teachers College, Columbia has put together this reading guide, specifically focused for Book Clubs.

For each chapter of Americanah, you will find a set of **Invitations** and a set of **Discussion Prompts**. Between the invitations and the prompts, you have rich resource which you can use whether you are a facilitator or participating reader in a book club. Some ways you can use the guide:

- **While reading:** Following each chapter, or chapters you find most interesting, review the invitations and choose one or more to respond to, whether to Connect, Question, Contemplate, or Create.
- **In preparation for your book club gathering:** prepare a response to one invitation and bring with you -or- read discussion questions in advance to get your mind (re)engaged with the material.
- **During book club:** Facilitators can choose a few of the discussion prompts as starting points for conversation. The goal is to share, to listen and to be heard, during the meeting, so there's no need to stick to the questions once the conversation gets going. Use the questions you like and skip the ones that don't work for you and your group.
- **Following book club:** Consider an Invitation to Create from one of the chapters – perhaps after a rich conversation, you and your group want to make something in response to the reading and discussion. Bring it to the next meeting to share!

Whatever ways you find work best for you and your group, enjoy the flexibility of the guide. Whether reading, reflecting, or discussing, questions and invitations await to increase your enjoyment of reading and connecting with the text. Be sure to let us know how it's going using Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or emailing us directly [cpet\\_admin@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:cpet_admin@tc.columbia.edu) with questions or comments. Visit our [One Book One New York](#) page for more resources.

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## INVITATIONS

**Connect:** “I only became black when I came to America.” (p.359) Would a version of that statement ring true for a white immigrant (i.e. “I only became Irish when I came to America.”)? If not, what is it about America that *makes* people “black?”

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 31. We’ll add it to our reader’s guide!

**Contemplate:** ““Who is he?’ She told him the man’s name. Rob. ‘He’s white?’ She was surprised that he would ask her this, and so soon.” (p. 356) Are you surprised that Curt would ask her this, and so soon?

**Create:** If you haven’t ever done so, try out Ifemelu’s “magazine challenge” from pages 364-366. Document your findings in the medium that feels most appropriate.

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Ifemelu has cheated on Curt and their relationship is over. Why did she do it?
2. “There was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself.” (p. 358) Explain what is meant by that.
3. Explain why Ifemelu challenges the woman at the party who says that race is never an issue for her and her white boyfriend? Why do you think the French hostess is happy at the turn in conversation?
4. What does Curt learn after Ifemelu takes him to the bookstore to look at magazines? Have you ever thought of the representation of Black women in magazines and what their representation means to different people? Explain.
5. How often do we choose silence over confrontation? Can you share a story?
6. What else do you want to talk about?

## AMERICANAH • PART 4 • CHAPTER 32



### INVITATIONS

**Connect:** “Remember that a woman is like a flower. Our time passes quickly.” (p. 373) What is a woman’s “time”? Once that time passes, is she no longer a woman?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 32. We’ll add it to our reader’s guide!

**Contemplate:** “Is race an invention or not?” (p. 374)

**Create:** “Remember that a woman is like a flower. Our time passes quickly.” (p. 373) What is a woman’s “time,” and what happens to her after it “passes?” As you craft your response, try playing with time as a medium. What sort of work can you create that chronicles or perhaps even *captures* time?

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. “For weeks, Ifemelu stumbled around, trying to remember the person she was before Curt.” (p. 370) Have you ever felt lost after a break-up, unable to locate yourself again or the life you had before? How did you anchor yourself again?
2. How has the relationship with Curt changed Ifemelu and her expectations for her life?
3. Is it the break-up that accounts for her mixed feelings towards her parents or is it something else?
4. Ifemelu experiences a lot of longing and loss in this chapter. What do you think she is longing for and what has she lost?
5. What else do you want to talk about?

## AMERICANAH • PART 4 • CHAPTER 33



### INVITATIONS

**Connect:** What would it take for you to feel safe enough to truly “unzip yourself?” (p. 380)

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 33. We’ll add it to our reader’s guide!

**Contemplate:** “The point of diversity workshops, or multicultural talks, was not to inspire any real change but to leave people feeling good about themselves.” (p. 377)

**Create:** If you were to “unzip yourself” (p. 380) what would people see? What would they hear? What would they read?

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. What are some of the emotions Ifemelu’s blog drew from her and from people around her?
2. She realizes after her first diversity talk in Ohio that people did not really want to be challenged, but rather, they wanted to feel good about themselves. What does she decide to do henceforth? Do you agree or disagree with her decision?
3. Have you ever tried an online dating site? Tell about your experience, and is it similar or different to Ifemelu’s experience?
4. What do you think of Ifemelu’s invitation in her blog where she invites folk to “Unzip” themselves?
5. What else do you want to talk about?



## INVITATIONS

**Connect:** “Later, when she came to know of the letters he wrote to Congress about Darfur, the teenagers he tutored at the high school on Dixwell, the shelter he volunteered at, she thought of him who did not have a normal spine but had, instead, a firm reed of goodness.” (p. 383) How might the partner, friend, or family member who knows you best describe your spine?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 34. We'll add it to our reader's guide!

**Contemplate:** “He knew about everything; she was intimidated by this and proud of this and slightly repelled by this.” (p. 384)

**Create:** “I’m not saying you have to be academic or boring. Keep your style but add more depth.” (p. 386) Revisit something you’ve created recently and, as Blaine instructs Ifemelu above, “add more depth.” What did you change? Why hadn’t you done in that way the first time? Is it *better* now? Is it possible to add still more depth? If so, why haven’t you done that yet?

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. On page 384, Ifemelu says about Blaine: “He knew about everything; she was intimidated by this, proud of this and slightly repelled by this.” Which of these emotions do you think are going to become stronger in the relationship as they stay together?
2. Blaine tries hard to be a good person. As in other relationships with men, she shifts towards his expectations--this time of goodness. How does this affect the way she sees herself?
3. Ifemelu’s parents want her boyfriend to be ‘Nigerian’ and ‘Christian’. What family pressures have you faced in choosing a partner?
4. What do you think of the statement in Ifemelu’s blog that in America, “Here’s the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed, but the language has not.”? What do you see or experience living in New York City?
5. What else do you want to talk about?

## AMERICANAH • PART 4 • CHAPTER 35



### INVITATIONS

**Connect:** “Blaine stopped to chat with the doorman, as he had chatted with their taxi driver from Penn Station, in that unforced manner that he had, forming alliances with janitors, with cleaning staff, with bus drivers.” (p. 392) In your estimation, why does Blaine behave this way?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 35. We'll add it to our reader's guide!

**Contemplate:** “I've told him he needs to write terrible things about his own people if he wants to do well. He needs to say Africans alone are to blame for African problems, and Europeans have helped Africa more than they've hurt Africa, and he'll be famous and people will say he's so honest!” (p. 394)

**Create:** “Shan had the air of a person who was somehow *chosen*.” (p. 393) Using images from old magazines, create a collage that depicts a “chosen” person and their environment.

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Even though Ifemelu and Shan are both Black women - their ways of life is so different. How does Blaine treat each of them? How does Ifemelu react to his treatment of his sister? Do you think Black women are a homogenous group? Why?
2. Ifemelu is slighted by Shan when they first meet. Has that ever happened to you? How did it make you feel?
3. “Shan had the air of someone who was *choose*.” (p. 393) Discuss.
4. Ifemelu and Shan have an interesting discussion about white and black men - what do you think about it?
5. Discuss Ifemelu’s blog where she refers to Barack Obama as the “*Magic Negro*”.
6. What else do you want to talk about?



## INVITATIONS

**Connect:** “He was left-leaning and well-meaning, crippled by his acknowledgement of his own many privileges.” (p. 401) Why would someone so privileged feel so crippled? Should he feel this way?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 36. We’ll add it to our reader’s guide!

**Contemplate:** “Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it’s not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is.” (p. 406)

**Create:** “The fried chicken you eat is not the fried chicken I eat, but it’s the fried chicken that Paula eats.” (p. 409) Ifemelu’s comment hints at *intersectionality*, the notion that none of us is merely of a race or a gender or a class or any other single category. Rather, our subject positions exist at the intersection of all of these (and many other) axes of self-identification. In this case, Ifemelu believes the fact that Blaine and Paula’s shared American-ness (citizenship & culture) is more significant than Blaine and Ifemelu’s shared blackness (race). At what intersection do you find yourself? How do you self-identify? Create a representation of that intersection that appeals to one of the senses...

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Ifemelu says she “did not quite belong with his friends,” speaking of Blaine. (p. 399) What does she see in them that they cannot see in themselves?
2. Ifemelu’s blog posts feature as a commentary that sandwiches a conversation about Barack Obama’s potential as a presidential candidate. Looking back on his election, how might the conversation be different (or the same) today?
3. Paula says her liberal parents “tick all the right boxes.” It may not be about race, but have you ever felt that you were ticking all the right boxes but somehow failing to “get it”? Tell about your experience and how you see it now.
4. What else do you want to talk about?



## INVITATIONS

**Connect:** “‘Omar doesn’t touch women to whom he is not related,’ Shan said. ‘Which is very sexy, no?’ And she tilted her head to look up suggestively at Omar.” (p. 414) Is Shan fetishizing Omar’s otherness? Is she *orientalizing* him?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 37. We’ll add it to our reader’s guide!

**Contemplate:** “In America, you don’t get to decide what race you are. It is decided for you.” (p. 419)

**Create:** “‘Nuance’ means keep people comfortable so everyone is free to think of themselves as *individuals* and everyone got where they are because of their *achievement*. ” (p. 416) Create two representations of the same phenomenon, and have one of them be more nuanced in the way Shan defines it.

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. It seems as if Dike has become Americanized completely. Name some of the things you notice that are different to his childhood as from Ifemelu’s childhood described earlier in the book. What are the characteristics that would make parents consider him being a model young man?
2. “It does not matter what was said; it mattered that it was Shan who said it.” (p. 413). What does this say about her personality? How do others around her, including Ifemelu, play into that conception?
3. The movements of Shan and the people at her Salon seem like pantomime and parody. What does Ifemelu mean by that observation?
4. “His wife must feel worse knowing you’re black” (p. 416). What does say about Black womanhood in relation to White womanhood?
5. Discuss the use of the word “nuance” (p. 416).
6. On page 416 Shan’s smile holds the “possibility of great cruelty.” What does this say about the sibling relationship between her and Blaine?
7. Ifemelu’s blog discusses the profile of the “Black Man”. Discuss this blog entry in the American context.
8. What else do you want to talk about?



## INVITATIONS

**Connect:** "Mr. White was, after all, an old black man beaten down by life and she wished she could overlook the liberties he took." (p. 424) Even if she *could* overlook the unwantedly sexualized way in which Mr. White interacted with her, *should* Ifemelu? Should she, as a woman, take as vocal and as principled a stand against this harassment as Blaine does against Mr. White's being racially profiled? Isn't that what Blaine would want her to do?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 38. We'll add it to our reader's guide!

**Contemplate:** "The actual tragedy of Emmett Till, he had told her once, was not the murder of a black child for whistling as a white woman but that some black people thought: But why did you whistle?" (p. 425)

**Create:** "A student called to ask him for suggestions about what to write on placards." (p. 426) Make a placard that is meant to protest against or advocate for something. Now, if you're feeling safe enough and up for it, take your placard for a walk in public...

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Blaine does not like the West African academic, Boubacar, but Ifemelu is reminded of her past and fortified by conversations with him. How does his friendship steady her?
2. The incident with Mr. White on campus sparks a new activism in Blaine that Ifemelu doesn't share, although she feels bad for the security guard. By not going to the protest, what is Ifemelu testing in her relationship with Blaine? In herself?
3. Have you ever been in a relationship where a 'principle' came between you? Were you able to overcome it?
4. After reading the blog on white privilege, what was your first impulse: to share it on Facebook, or ask yourself the questions? Why did you feel this way?
5. What else do you want to talk about?



## INVITATIONS

**Connect:** "She felt a momentary anger and wanted to say that it was unfair of him to hold out forgiveness like this." (p. 435) Under what circumstances would you withhold forgiveness from someone you loved?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 39. We'll add it to our reader's guide!

**Contemplate:** "She watched the coconut crumble into white dust; it saddened her to think that it would never be a whole coconut again..." (p. 435)

**Create:** "Can I come this weekend so we can cook coconut rice? I'll do the cooking." (p.434) If someone wanted to make you feel good, what could they cook you? What would you cook for a special person to make them feel good? If you have the means, cook that meal for them...

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Dike gets blamed for hacking into the school's computer. What is the significance of Aunty Uju saying: They have to blame the Black kid first? What are some of the other stereotypes that Dike shares with Ifemelu about his life experiences in school, with friends and even in church?
2. What do you think of Blaine refusing to take Ifemelu's calls for nine days? Have you ever had an argument and been met with silence and refusal to be forgiven? How did you feel? How did you respond?
3. Ifemelu holds onto Blaine but he "eases away" (p. 435). What does this forebode?
4. In her blog post Ifemelu says that Americans are most uncomfortable talking about race. Discuss her definition and exploration of the words: Diversity, Culture, Urban and Racially Charged.
5. What else do you want to talk about?

## AMERICANAH • PART 4 • CHAPTER 40



### INVITATIONS

**Connect:** "She tried to imagine the people who wrote those [racist] posts, under monikers like SuburbanMom231 and NormanRockwellRocks, sitting at their desks, a cup of coffee beside them, and their children about to come home on the school bus in a glow of innocence."

What's the best way to deal with people who anonymously spew hate speech online?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 40. We'll add it to our reader's guide!

**Contemplate:** "Ifemelu liked to watch Clinton on television, in her square trouser suits, her face a mask of resolve, her prettiness disguised, because that was the only way to convince the world that she was able." (p. 437)

**Create:** "She first read, on the Internet, the breaking news that Barack Obama would give a speech on race, in response to the footage of his pastor, and she sent a text to Blaine, who was teaching a class. His response was simple: Yes! (p. 443) If you had the opportunity to tell all of America your thoughts about race, what would you say?"

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. After their fight, Ifemelu and Blaine's relationship cools, but they reconnect over Obama's campaign. Has passion ever fizzled out for you in a relationship? Did your relationship survive-- why or why not?
2. We see tensions of race in America playing out over Obama as a candidate for president in this chapter. Were you living in New York then? What highs and lows did you feel during his first campaign?
3. Shan makes small intrusion into this chapter and shows her true colors more than ever. Do you have a 'Shan' in your life? How do you relate to them?
4. "Barack Obama's voice rose and fell, his face solemn, and around him the large and resplendent crowd of the hopeful. Ifemelu watched, mesmerized. And there was, at that moment, nothing that was more beautiful to her than America." (p. 448) How did you experience this moment in America?
5. What else do you want to talk about?



## INVITATIONS

**Connect:** “A sacrilege, that question; immigrants did not ask other immigrants how they got their papers, did not burrow into those layered, private places; it was sufficient simply to admire that the papers had been got, a legal status acquired.” Why is it that we don’t talk about the things that we aren’t supposed to talk about?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 41. We’ll add it to our reader’s guide!

**Contemplate:** “‘Oh,’ Aisha said, as though she had just realized that Ifemelu belonged to a group of people whose green cards simply fell from the sky. People like her could not, of course, get theirs from an employer.” (p.451)

**Create:** “She kept twisting Ifemelu’s hair, her hand movements unchanged, while her face, as though it did not belong to her body, continued to crumple, tears running from her eyes, her chest heaving.” (p. 451) Think on this image. Represent, in whatever way seems best to you, this idea that we can express such a strong emotion in one part of ourselves while the other part(s) continue on, seemingly unaffected.

## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. “Why couldn’t these African women keep their salon clean and ventilated?” How does Ifemelu position herself as different from the hairstylists? How does she realize that she is in fact, not so different? How does her promising Aisha that she would go speak to Chijioke absolve her?
2. When Ifemelu is asked about her green card she is firstly affronted, but then explains kindly, as she realizes her privilege. What are your thoughts around immigration in the USA and how people deal with it in different ways?
3. Why do you think Aisha stops herself from embracing Ifemelu as she leaves the salon?
4. Aunty Uju frantically calls Ifemelu to tell her that Dike was hospitalized because he attempted suicide. What is your gut reaction to this news?
5. What else do you want to talk about?

## AMERICANAH • PART 5 • CHAPTER 42



### INVITATIONS

**Connect:** "He had at first been excited by Facebook, ghosts of old friends suddenly morphing to life...But he began to be appalled by the air of unreality, the careful manipulation of images to create a parallel life, pictures that people had taken with Facebook in mind..." (p. 458) How do you manage your expectations and/or your understanding of life on social media?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 42. We'll add it to our reader's guide!

**Contemplate:** "He had discovered that grief did not dim with time; it was instead a volatile state of being. Sometimes the pain was as abrupt as it was on the day...she was lying unbreathing on her bed; other times, he forgot that she had died and would make cursory plans about flying to the east to see her." (p. 458)

**Create:** Obinze begins to email Ifemelu: "He had never told himself his own story, never allowed himself to reflect on it...Writing her also became a way of writing himself. He had nothing to lose." (p. 461) Write an email or letter to someone you haven't been in touch with. Tell them your story of a significant moment or memory.

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Obinze is concerned, waiting for Ifemelu's reply. Talk about your own experiences with waiting. Obinze Googles and Facebooks to tend to his curiosity/concern. What are some of your ways of coping with this discomfort?
2. What about the funeral of Obinze's mother rings true to you? What do you make of Obinze's question, "Why do our funerals become so quickly about other things that are not about the person who died?"
3. What is at the root of Isioma's question, "Are they teaching children that a Christmas is not real Christmas unless snow falls like it does abroad?"
4. How do you imagine Obinze is affected by allowing himself to reflect on his own story -- to tell it to Ifemelu, to himself?
5. What else do you want to talk about?

## AMERICANAH • PART 6 • CHAPTER 43



### INVITATIONS

**Connect:** Ifemelu makes "...the kind of jollof rice he liked, flecked with bits of red and green peppers..." (p 469) to cheer Dike. What is it about food that can comfort or change a mood? What would someone make to cheer you?

**Question:** Share a question about chapter 43. We'll add it to our reader's guide!

**Contemplate:** "'This is the life,' he said, lying with his face to the sun." (p 471) Where would you be if you uttered these words?

**Create:** "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was." (p 470) Often we focus on what we are not or what others are not. What words would you use to describe who you are? Dig deep! Write all the words that fit...then write some more.

### DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. For the first few days Ifemelu slept on Dike's floor, her thoughts spinning on all the possibilities of what might have happened. Have you ever had a life experience where you were so afraid to let someone go for fear of losing them? Tell us about it.
2. What do we understand by depression? How is Ifemelu trying to come to terms with it? Why does Ifemelu feel like her own guilt is "spreading and sullyng her?" (p. 471)
3. Can you explain what the "shrill, silent aftermath" is?
4. On the last page of this chapter, Dike tell Ifemelu that she should go back to Nigeria, that he promises that he will be OK. Do you believe and trust that promise? Why or why not?
5. What else do you want to talk about?