

# Safe Distance

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A GUIDE FOR READING GROUPS

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*Safe Distance moves between landscapes and interiors, the beauty of Southeast Asia and the wreckage of war, between comedy and grief, and between what we show the world and what we carry in silence. The questions below are designed to open rather than close, and to take your group wherever the book takes you.*

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## OPENING QUESTIONS

1. The book opens with Noor's story, written in the second person – you fled, you lost, and you became a word. What effect did this narrative choice have on you as a reader? How did it shape the way you received Noor's story throughout the rest of the book?
2. Edie flees London, believing she has burnout and that time in Southeast Asia will help her recover, as travel has before. Did you believe her? Was there a point when you sensed that what she was carrying was something more than exhaustion?

## ON EDIE

3. Edie presents herself to the world – and perhaps to herself – as someone who is coping. At what point did you first sense the gap between the face she shows and what is actually happening underneath?
4. Edie's humour runs through the book. How did the comedy sit alongside the darker material for you? Did it make the difficult parts easier or harder to absorb?
5. Edie's childhood is revealed in fragments rather than through a continuous account – through remembered scenes, physical reactions and patterns she cannot quite explain. Was that fragmented approach more powerful than a chronological account might have been? What did it allow the book to do?
6. The book ends with Edie making two promises to herself before reflecting on the wounded past selves she carries within her. Did the ending feel satisfying? What did the final words, "Wounds and all", mean to you?
7. Amir is funny, awkward, always halfway out the door, and yet clearly drawn to Edie. Did you like him? And does liking him make his limitations harder or easier to forgive?

## ON NOOR

8. Noor reaches the reader through Edie's lens: through the prologue, their messages and calls, and Edie's responses to her unfolding journey. Did you feel you knew her?

What did this limited perspective allow you to understand about her – and what did it withhold?

9. Noor makes the decision to board the dinghy. It is a choice, made under impossible conditions. How did the book make you think about the refugee experience?

10. Edie throws enormous energy into supporting Noor while consistently failing to attend to her own needs. Do you recognise that pattern – of finding it easier to pour yourself into others than to tend to yourself? And what do you think it costs Edie?

## ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEM

11. Edie and Noor begin as a volunteer and a refugee. How would you describe their relationship by the end of the book? What does it ask of both of them?

12. At one point, Edie is snorkelling above manta rays while simultaneously imagining Noor and her children drowning in the same water. What do you think the book is saying about beauty and suffering existing simultaneously in the same world, the same water?

13. The book sits with the discomfort of watching the world's suffering arrive through our screens while continuing to inhabit our own lives. Did reading *Safe Distance* change anything about how you think about that discomfort – or make it harder to ignore?

## ON CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

14. *Safe Distance* holds two stories that never quite meet – Edie's personal journey across Southeast Asia and Noor's crossing. How did that structure work for you?

15. *Safe Distance* moves between registers – lyrical, comedic, and raw – sometimes within the same page. How did that range affect your reading?

16. Edie is telling us her own story, but the book is partly about the gap between what she tells herself and what is actually happening. Did you find her a reliable narrator of her own life? And does it matter?

## ON BIGGER THEMES

17. *Safe Distance* is partly about displacement – Noor's forced flight, Edie's voluntary running, and the question of whether "home" is a place or a feeling. Where do you think Edie is by the end of the book?

18. The water in this book is sanctuary and threat, healing and danger: the holy waters, the hot springs, the rooftop pool, the snorkelling reef, the Aegean, and the Watsu session. By the end of the book, what did water mean to you as a reader?

19. Elsa introduces Edie to the idea that the body can hold what the conscious mind cannot access – that trauma can live in flesh and muscle and nerve as well as in memory. Had you encountered that idea before reading *Safe Distance*? And did it reframe what you had already read?

## A FINAL QUESTION

20. What stayed with you from the book?