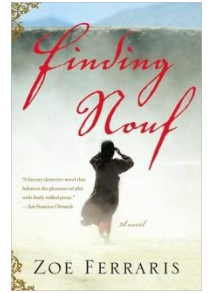


Reading Group Discussion Questions—Finding Nouf



Nayir feels obligated to find Nouf as a favor to his friend Othman, and to the Shrawi family, which has been very good to him. What deeper meaning does the search for Nouf have for Nayir? Discuss the relevance of the title, *Finding Nouf*.

Finding Nouf tells a moving and mysterious story, but also gives readers a peek into the world of conservative Muslims in Saudi Arabia. How do Muslim customs hinder Nayir and Katya in their investigation? How do these customs help the investigators?

Nayir's identity is almost entirely contingent on his modesty and righteousness. Do you think he overdoes it? If so, what might Nayir be compensating for? How do other Muslims in the novel, both men and women, seem to feel about his religious conservatism? What do their perspectives tell you about modern Saudi Arabia?

In a world that values family and community above individuality, Nayir seems an independent nation. He feels most at home in the desert or on the sea, far away from the city and its populace. Examine Nayir's comparison of the desert with the sea on page 108. What attracts him to each? Why do you think he prefers these places to the city?

The task of penetrating the cloistered world of a rich Muslim girl forces Nayir to face his disappointments as a bachelor and his lifelong curiosities about women. Raised primarily by his uncle and with little courting experience, Nayir has had few opportunities for exposure to the feminine. Find examples throughout the book of Nayir's longing for contact with, and insight into, womankind. Discuss how his opinions and impressions change or remain the same by the end of the novel.

The novel portrays various levels of seclusion in Saudi Arabian culture. Identify the ways in which people and groups are cut off from one another, both literally and figuratively, and examine how these imposed structures and traditions affect people's opinions of, and interactions with, one another.

On page 110, Nayir muses about the confession he's just obtained from Muhammad: Nouf was planning to abandon her husband in New York and make a life in America. He thinks, "She had died in the desert, but her running to America would have been another kind of death." What does he mean? What is it that disturbs him most about Nouf's secret plans?

When Nayir meets paper-artist Juliet at the American Ladies of Jeddah meeting, he is both painfully uncomfortable and deeply intrigued. How do you feel about his interpretation of her? What was it like for you to see American culture, particularly as it relates to American women, from a wholly outside, naïve perspective?

With reservation, Nayir accompanies Katya to the Big Mix, a desegregated lunch buffet open to families and friendly to unmarried couples. Inside, despite an initial discomfort about the unveiled female diners, Nayir "felt relief, mingled with surprise that a restaurant as modern as this one would be filled with good people acting appropriately." What does this tell you about Nayir? Do you think the experience changes him in any way? Why or why not? What does this scene tell you about Saudi Arabia and its shifting values in the modern age?

On page 214, Katya takes issue with Nayir's belief that Nouf "had everything," arguing that Nouf only "had everything her father let her have." What is the difference? Outline both Nayir's and Katya's perspectives on what might have happened to Nouf and explain where each is coming from. Do you see Nouf as spoiled and ungrateful, as Nayir seems to, or do you sympathize with her desperation, as Katya does? Explain your opinion.

Compare and contrast the relationships between Muhammad and Nouf and Ahmad and Katya. How would you characterize each? Do you agree with Nayir, that Muhammad failed to protect Nouf because he was too busy spoiling her, probably out of his own secret desire for her? How do Muhammad's indiscretions stack up against Ahmad's? He similarly keeps Katya's secrets as she breaks the law and otherwise behaves in what her father (and others) might deem an inappropriate manner. Do you think these men are doing their jobs? Why or why not?

Discuss the interaction between Katya and her future in-laws. Friends have told her that a woman should choose a husband based on his mother and sisters. Why? Do you think Katya would ever have assimilated into the Shrawi household? Why or why not? What does Othman's behavior in the coatroom on page 226 indicate to Katya? Why do you think she bursts into tears after leaving?

Discuss how Nayir's stereotypical "knowledge" of women limited his theories to possible motives a man would have for kidnapping or killing Nouf. Did you suspect she might have been killed for other reasons, or by a woman? Why or why not?

How does the author comment on certain aspects of conservative Islam, such as the Saudi religious police and rules restricting women? Do you feel that you know her opinion by the end of the novel? If so, what is it? If not, why not? Did reading this novel at all affect your opinions of the American lifestyle? Why or why not?

Zoë Ferraris moved to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. She lived in a conservative Muslim community with her then-husband and his family, a group of Saudi-Palestinians.

In 2006, she completed her MFA in Fiction at Columbia University. Her debut novel, *Finding Nouf* (published as *Night of the Mi'raj* in the UK) is now being published in twenty-five countries. A follow-up novel, *City of Veils*, is coming August, 2010.

She currently lives in San Francisco.



Principal Works

long fiction

Finding Nouf, 2008

City of Veils, 2010