

About This Book

Born into Somali royalty and Saudi Arabian wealth, Fatma is given away in infancy and, at age 12, forced into an arranged marriage with a young Peace Corps worker with ties to her uncle and guardian. Prejudice and cultural demands lead to a number of painful promises that will dictate the course of her life in both Africa and America.

Throughout her struggles on two continents, of one thing Fatma remains clear: there are individuals in every level of society who are greedy for power and eager to dominate, at any cost, those weaker than themselves. Everywhere there is a jungle, and in every jungle there is a king lion.

This novel, loosely based on a true story, is the cross-cultural journey of an African woman's descent into an American hell, and finds its echo in the descent of her native Somalia into its own hell of violent desperation. It leaves the reader with the gifts of unsuspected connection and surprising hope.

For Discussion

1. Consider the novel's title and Fatma's words: "But she hobbled on one foot in America, while the other remained implanted in rich African soil soaked with tradition and human blood. Across the continents her legs stretched. Her African foot never caught up with the American one: it merely kept her displaced and off balance. 'Africa is here,' one foot beckoned her. 'You are an American now. Be glad. Africa is not safe,' the other whispered." (p86) What are the many obstacles Fatma encounters when she first comes to America? Are they comparable to those she encountered in Katundu?
2. What are the obstacles preventing the characters in this book from being loved? From giving love? Could and did Fatma ever really love Nick? Did Daniel ever really love Fatma? Why do you think Fatma views Daniel as being weak? Do you think he's weak? Was her father, the general, weak?
3. What do Elsa, Fatma, India, and Mrs. Lucchese all have in common? What sets them apart as immigrants struggling to succeed in America?
4. Consider the women in Fatma's life: her birth mother, Auntie, India, Sara, Pia, Elsa, Miss Wilma, Jamila, Ayasha, and Miss Greene. What does Fatma want from them? What does each provide for her? What does she have to overcome before she can determine her needs and begin to know herself? Why does she steal from Miss Greene?
5. Why is it important to Fatma to have Mary Ellen like her and be responsible for securing her passport?
6. "Everywhere there is a jungle and everywhere a king lion." Discuss the significance of this quote in Fatma's life. Do the men or the women wield more power in this novel?

7. Contrast the implosion of Somalia with that of Fatma's own self destruction. Given the plight of Somalia today, do you think Fatma will be able to overcome what Somalia hasn't? Why?
8. Do you feel that anyone succeeds as a parent in this novel?
9. The Royal Lion is anything but regal. Why do you think the author called it that? What kind of people "go there to hide from themselves," as Fatma said. *What does Sometimes It Snows in America* reveal about the world of addiction?
10. Prejudice and hypocrisy drive the intentions and actions of many of the characters in this book. Who do you feel carries the most prejudice? How does this prejudice affect the lives of others? Can anyone really be free of prejudice? Hypocrisy?
11. Can you understand how someone like Fatma could fall prey to domestic violence? Do you think she should have been able to detect Nick's motives earlier on? Was she completely naïve in her involvement with Nick? Altruistic in her desire to earn money for her family?
12. Lisha told Fatma, "You were born with a full head of hair and consequently an evil spirit, a bad jinn . . . But respect your good jinn. It will be your salvation one day." (p28) How do religious beliefs and folklore in the novel control Fatma's fate? Which concept was the most detrimental in Fatma's life? Can you equate the notion of good and evil jinns to any other belief system you know? Why does Fatma insist on going to Lamu despite Hamal's warnings?
13. When Sara says that her name means "princess," do you feel that this is a turning point in their relationship and in Fatma's road to self awareness? If not, what do you think are the most pivotal points in her character's development?
14. There are several references to finding another's "chink in the armor." (For example, pp195 & 201) Why is it important to certain characters in the book, including Fatma? How do she and other characters use this discovery? Can control and domination be achieved without it?
15. Deception is a major theme in literature. "She's learning to peek through a body's window, to put her nose to the pane and zoom in beyond all the looks – all the talk – and discover bits of truth, plain as day, lying on the mantle of the soul, hanging on its walls." (p289) What does this statement of Fatma's say about the choices she's made in her life? About what is and what appears to be?
16. What is the significance of the statement, "She treads lightly through that life, like glass walking on glass." (p287)?

Do you think Fatma will ever meet Hussein or Kareem? If so, how do you envision those scenes unfolding?