

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. One of the main themes in *City of the Sun* is the issue of identity (in the context of country, religion, and family). In Chapter 25, Maio writes that upon hearing the Egyptian people raise a toast to their country, "Maya felt a lump in her throat as she was reminded that she herself belonged nowhere." Joe Levi later says of his family "Our religion is Judaism, but our citizenship is French, and our homeland is Egypt." In what ways does the issue of identity manifest itself throughout the book, and what other characters struggle with it?
2. The author points to differences, both real and perceived, between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Does she show any preference for one of these groups over the other? Were you aware of any differences between Jewish subcultures before reading the book?
3. Of Maya Blumenthal, the author writes: "She loved the sun and had always felt a powerful kinship with it, reveling in its warm glow and healing rays. She would drink it in, believing God was caressing her and filling her body with light. Perhaps this was so, for people often said she gave off sunlight when she smiled—at least that's what they used to say." Discuss the one of the themes of the novel.
4. Two of the key female characters in the novel are Maya Blumenthal and Dorothy Calley, the American secretary to the U.S. Ambassador in Egypt. Maya is intelligent but secretive, an often overwhelmed refugee trying to protect her family; Dorothy is a seemingly strong, fiercely independent woman in a position of some authority. Which of these two women do you think the author identifies with? Does Maya surprise you with any of her actions or decisions?
5. Anwar Sadat, who plays a pivotal role in *City of the Sun*, later became president of Egypt and signed a historic peace agreement with Israel (for which he was assassinated). Do his actions in the novel foreshadow his eventual willingness to compromise with Israel?
6. Throughout the novel, Maya is torn between her desire for independence and her obligations toward her family. Does this inner conflict make her more or less relatable as a character?
7. In what ways does the mutually growing attraction between Maya and Mickey Connolly help or harm Mickey's mission to bring Erik Blumenthal over to the American side? What is the likely future of the relationship between Mickey and Maya?
8. Maya's father chastises Joe Levi for not taking Jewish customs seriously, and for laxity in the Jewish education of his children. Is this a fair criticism? Why or why not?
9. Do you find Allegra Levi to be a sympathetic character? What do you think is the reason for the emotional distance she displays toward the Blumenthal family?
10. Which of the main historical event(s) in the book foreshadow the shaping of modern Egypt and the Middle East? Given the state of Egypt and the rest of the Middle East today, are you surprised by the Cairo that the author depicts? Why do you think that so many of the Egyptian people were willing to trust Hitler's Nazi government over the British during this stage of the war?
11. In 1952, King Farouk was dethroned and kicked out of the country by the Egyptian military, including Anwar Sadat. Do the political pressures Farouk faces during the war as depicted in

the novel suggest this outcome for the king? Do you think the king's lifestyle and actions may have contributed to his downfall?

12. How did Zionism affect the Jews living in Egypt in 1941? How do you think it affected them after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948?
13. The Muslim Brotherhood would go on to pave the way for Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist groups. In what ways do the group's actions in the novel predict this eventuality?
14. Do Ambassador Kirk and the other American authorities seem to have genuine concern for the well-being of Erik Blumenthal, or do they just see him as someone who can help them achieve their own goals?
15. Heinrich Kesner proves to be a formidable opponent for our heroes. Which of Kesner's actions demonstrate his cunning? What are his biggest mistakes?
16. Are you surprised by the choice Erik Blumenthal makes at the end of the novel? Do you sympathize with his decision, and does it make sense given his characterization throughout the book? In what other ways could the book have ended? Could any alternate ending be satisfying?