



The Jewish Community Library

Book Club in a Box Guide

California Dreaming

By Noa Silver

The following questions are provided by the author to enhance your experience of the book by suggesting a variety of ways to discuss the novel.

1. The novel opens with Elena reflecting on the generations that have lived in San Francisco before her. How does this theme of generational legacy carry through the book?
2. The book follows Elena's journey through multiple major life transitions. How well does she adjust to change? Do her choices reflect resilience and maturity, or something else?
3. The novel captures a particular moment in time, including the Occupy movement and the 2016 election. How do these historical moments shape Elena's journey?
4. How does Elena's experience with Teach for America change her perspective on education and her sense of purpose?
5. The novel ends with Elena deciding to return to California. What do you think her future holds?

Thematic Deep-Dive Questions

1. Dreams vs. Reality: Elena arrives in California with idealistic goals for teaching but eventually leaves the profession. How does the novel explore the gap between idealism and reality?
2. Family and Inheritance: Elena's mother was part of the Weatherman collective, and her grandparents were Holocaust survivors. How does Elena's family history shape her identity and choices?
3. Education and Power: Throughout the book, Elena struggles with how to make literature and poetry relevant to her students. What do you think the book is saying about the role of education in social change?
4. Activism and Meaning: Elena joins the Occupy movement but later questions its impact. What does the book suggest about different approaches to activism?

5. The Role of Place: The novel is deeply tied to its setting, from San Francisco to Big Sur, from California to New England. How do different locations shape Elena's internal world?

Character Analysis Questions

1. Elena: How does Elena's relationship to poetry reflect her emotional state throughout the novel?

2. Kyle: What does Kyle represent in Elena's journey? How do his values contrast with hers?

3. Anna: What does Elena's relationship with her student Anna reveal about her strengths and limitations as a teacher?

4. Elena's Mother: How does Elena's evolving understanding of her mother shape her decisions?

5. Paula and Jesse: How do Paula and Jesse serve as foils to Elena? What do they represent about different life paths?

Jewish Book Club Questions

1. Intergenerational Trauma: How does the novel depict inherited trauma from Elena's Holocaust-survivor grandparents? How does this shape her attitudes toward safety, risk, and belonging?

2. Jewish Identity and Activism: The novel features moments where Elena is confronted with discussions about Israel and Palestine. How does she navigate these moments, and what do they reveal about her Jewish identity?

3. Passover Seder Scene: The Passover seder in the novel becomes a moment of tension. What does this scene reveal about Elena's connection to Jewish ritual and family history?

4. Responsibility: Elena feels responsible for Anna's future and even considers sponsoring her to stay in the U.S. How does her reaction reflect Jewish concepts of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and personal responsibility?

5. Generational Shifts in Jewish Identity: Elena's relationship with Judaism is more ambiguous than her grandparents'. How does this reflect broader generational changes in Jewish identity and practice?