



On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

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Discussion Questions

1. When we meet the narrator of this novel, we don't know his name, only that he is writing to his mother in a language she cannot read. He says, "I am writing from inside a body that used to be yours. Which is to say, I am writing as a son" (10). How does the book explore the interplay of language—how he identifies himself and communicates the world—and lived, corporeal experience?
2. What do the animals in the book—the monarch butterflies, the buffaloes, even the "little dog" after which the narrator is named—represent for the narrator? How does he try to understand their instinctual movements and behaviors?
3. Do the narrator and his mother have the same idea of what is required, or what it means, to be an American? How do their expectations compare with their experiences—his as a student and hers in the nail salon?
4. How does Lan act as a buffer between Little Dog and his mother? What holes does she help fill in in how he is raised, and what he understands about his past?
5. How does being raised by two women, whose own relationship is complicated and fraught, impact the narrator? What does he come to understand about violence, sexuality, and loyalty from them?
6. Discuss the setting of the novel and its various enclaves—the city versus the tobacco farm, etc. Does the narrator seem to be shaped by his environment, or vice versa?
7. Does the family's story evoke pity or sympathy from you as a reader, and why if so? Consider how they use mood rings to evaluate if they're happy, and the idea that "Good was more often enough, was a precious spark we sought and harvested of and for one another" (214).
8. While reading, did you know that the novel was autobiographical? How did that affect your understanding of the story if so, and if not does that change your interpretation of it now?



