

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide
Asymmetry
By Lisa Halliday

Author:

Lisa Halliday grew up in Medfield, Massachusetts and currently lives in Milan, Italy. Her work has appeared in *The Paris Review* and she is the recipient of a 2017 Whiting Award for Fiction. *Asymmetry* is her first novel. (from the Publisher.)

Summary:

Told in three distinct and uniquely compelling sections, *Asymmetry* explores the imbalances that spark and sustain many of our most dramatic human relations: inequities in age, power, talent, wealth, fame, geography, and justice. The first section, “Folly,” tells the story of Alice, a young American editor, and her relationship with the famous and much-older writer Ezra Blazer. A tender and exquisite account of an unexpected romance that takes place in New York during the early years of the Iraq War, “Folly” also suggests an aspiring novelist’s coming-of-age. By contrast, “Madness” is narrated by Amar, an Iraqi-American man who, on his way to visit his brother in Kurdistan, is detained by immigration officers and spends the last weekend of 2008 in a holding room in Heathrow. These two seemingly disparate stories gain resonance as their perspectives interact and overlap, with yet new implications for their relationship revealed in an unexpected coda.

A stunning debut from a rising literary star, *Asymmetry* is an urgent, important, and truly original work that will captivate any reader while also posing arresting questions about the very nature of fiction itself. (from the Publisher.)

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Halliday chose to title her novel *Asymmetry*? Discuss the central relationships within the book. In what ways are they unequal? Are there other things that are asymmetrical within the book in addition to the interpersonal relationships? Discuss them with your book club.
2. Alice tells Ezra, “I guess you could say . . . that I’m a good old-fashioned girl” (p. 17). Describe the context of this statement. How did you interpret the statement? How would you describe Alice? Did your perception of her change throughout the novel? In what ways?
3. Discuss the structure of the novel. Did the titles of each section frame your understanding of the narrative that follows? If so, how? Who or what do you think “Folly” and “Madness” refer to?
4. Amar recounts how at a dinner with Maddie and one of Maddie’s high school friends, the conversation turned to religion. Were you surprised to learn that Amar was religious, given that he identifies as an empiricist? How does he reconcile the two belief systems that are seemingly at odds? Explain his argument in favor of religion.
5. Amar says that his mother has told him, “You would be happier . . . if you were more like your brother. Sami lives in the moment, like a dog,” and then notes with irony that Sami’s name means “*high, lofty, or elevated*—not traits you’d readily associate with [a dog]” (p. 149). Did you find yourself making certain assumptions about the characters based on their names? If so, what were they? Ezra’s name isn’t revealed immediately when he starts spending time with Alice. What’s the effect?

6. Amar “once heard a filmmaker say that in order to be truly creative a person must be in possession of four things: irony, melancholy, a sense of competition, and boredom” (p. 152). Do you agree? What do you think leads to creativity? As a well-respected author, Ezra is viewed by many as “truly creative.” Do you think he possesses all the characteristics enumerated in the statement? Share some examples.
7. When they are discussing a homeless man in their neighborhood, Ezra chastises Alice, telling her, “Don’t sentimentalize him” (p. 38). Explain this statement. Why does Ezra object to the way that Alice is speaking about the man? Are any of the other characters guilty of sentimentalizing others within the narrative? What are the dangers in doing so?
8. Ezra asks Alice, “Do you ever think this isn’t good for you?” (p. 49) of their relationship. Why might it be detrimental to Alice? What do you think of their relationship? Did your feelings about it change as you got to know Ezra and Alice as a couple? Why or why not? What do you think they see in each other?
9. Amar muses, “Sometimes I wonder whether we hide lovers from others because it makes it easier to hide ourselves from ourselves” (p. 179). What are the reasons that Alice and Ezra give each other for keeping their relationship hidden? Do you think they’re being truthful about the rationale behind their actions? Explain your answer.
10. When Amar is speaking with Hassan, Hassan tells him to “think about the future.” Upon reflection, Amar says, “If I were to articulate the prevailing impression of the . . . weeks I spent in Iraq . . . it would be to venture that the future meant something very different there from what it means in, say, America” (p. 222). Based on Amar’s descriptions of his visit in Iraq, do you agree? Why is it so hard for Zahra’s family to understand the concept of making New Year’s resolutions? Compare his world view to that of Zahra’s family. Do Ezra and Alice also experience different perceptions of what “the future” means? Explain your answer.
11. Amar tells Sami that the more time he spent in the Middle East, the more he understood why Alastair said, “the more time a foreign journalist spends in the Middle East, the more difficult it becomes for him to write about it” (p. 226). Explain the sentiment that Alastair expresses. What causes Amar’s view to evolve? Why does Sami disagree? What does Sami think the role of art should be? What do you think?
12. Passages from several books are interspersed within the text of *Asymmetry*. What books do these excerpts come from? Why do you think that Halliday has included these passages? Did the excerpts affect your reading? If so, how?
13. Both Amar and Alice make unexpected disclosures to strangers—to the doctor in the airport and to the judge during jury duty respectively. What are the disclosures that each of the characters share? Why are they able to make these assertions in front of virtual strangers? Were you surprised by their pronouncements?
14. Consider the parallels between *Asymmetry* and *Alice in Wonderland*, beginning with the first sentence and including all the foods and beverages (and pills) Alice and Ezra eat and drink, the description of Alice’s first ride up Ezra’s elevator, Amar’s reflection on rabbit holes, and Ezra’s reference on page 261 to penetrating the looking-glass. Discuss these and any other similarities between the two books. What might this connection be trying to say?
15. Chad Harbach praised *Asymmetry*, saying, “Halliday’s debut novel starts like a story you’ve heard, only to become a book unlike any you’ve read. The initial mystery is how its pieces fit together; the lasting one is how she pulled the whole thing off.” Were you able to solve the “mystery” of how the seemingly disparate stories related to each other? Talk about it with your book club. Did you find the stories more powerful by reading them in tandem?

(Questions issued by publisher.)