

***Bodega* Discussion Guide**

Introduction

Bodega by Su Hwang is a coming of age story told in poems. Set in New York and California, with excursions to Korea in the days of the author's parents and ancestors, this collection "moves through individual and collective memory as one might move through an actual bodega: fingers running across detergent and snacks in bright packages, delivering greetings to someone from the neighborhood, trying to remember what you came to get in the first place, recalling a memory sparked by the sudden whiff of a familiar smell," *Leah Silvieus writes in her review of Su Hwang's first book.*

As in a bodega, the pieces of story are packaged in a wide variety of forms, small and large, traditional and experimental. Enter, browse, and sample. Ask how your own story might relate to this poet's. Explore *Bodega* and enjoy the adventure.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Consider the title of this book. Why do you think the poet chose the word *Bodega*? What is a bodega and where does it appear in the book? What symbolic meaning or association might the urban, communal space of a bodega have in terms of race, identity, community, belonging, and disenfranchisement or marginalization?
2. Do you have a favorite poem from this collection? Did one of these poems strongly speak to you? Why?
3. When Abbey Faulkner from WJON asked what kind of poetry she writes, Su Hwang answered that these poems are narrative and lyrical. A simple way to define those literary terms is that narrative tells a story, and lyrical poetry reveals the observations of one an individual from his/her/their personal perspective. Su also explained that in this collection, she presented a wide variety of forms, long and short, traditional and experimental. Which poems' form did you particularly like, appreciate, or find interesting?
4. Explore the theme of *Han*, a particularly Korean feeling, which can be described as a permanent emotional imprint, rooted in an experience of injustice or unfairness. *Han* can include the sense that one's tiny but important life is doomed to be consumed by invisible, unconquerable systemic powers. How is *Han* depicted in the book, and how does it shape the behavior and attitude of the people we meet—the author, her family, friends, and acquaintances? Does *Han* seem to have a mostly positive or mostly negative impact on the people who experience this powerful feeling?
5. What perspective does this book offer on the subject of otherness? For example, in the long poem "Bodega" (pp 44-50), who perceives another as different, and therefore suspicious,

untrustworthy, or deserving of contempt? What shapes people's beliefs about others? How do people's beliefs impact those around them?

6. Evaluate this poet's use of epigraphs (short quotations from other writers' poems) to begin each section. Is there a common thread—an image or a tone or sound—that somehow connects the epigraphs to each other? Or, in the same way a pound of coffee and a bottle of shampoo are unrelated, but both might be found inside a bodega, do the epigraphs seem disconnected and unrelated? When you read the epigraphs, what image or memory springs to mind, or what emotions do you feel?

7. To divide the book into sections, and longer poems into smaller sections, this poet frequently uses small roman numerals. Try to guess why she made this choice, when she might have used roman capitals (I., II., III), or the ten digit hindu-arabic system (1, 2, 3), or chosen some symbol like the infinity sign (∞), as she does in “Duende Essays” beginning on page 63.

8. The word *duende* is Spanish. *Duende* might refer to the fiery spirit behind a great emotionally-stirring performance, or it might be one's emotion or response to a selected piece of art. Why do you think this poet chose to borrow words from other languages instead of translating them into English? What might her choice—to leave words like *duende* and *han* untranslated—say about the effectiveness of words to identify or describe human emotion?

9. “Coming of age” is a literary name for a story relating to an adolescent's movement toward adulthood, in which the protagonist—the main character—awakens to a new understanding of his or herself and the surrounding world. What makes this collection a coming of age story? What new understanding does the central character—the Korean American daughter—gain about herself, her family, her community, and the world?

10. Solmaz Sharif writes that the poems in *Bodega* “are observant and cinematic, tracing the way our many-languaged lives come up against each other in these united states.” Do you agree? Has reading this book changed your perception of, or feelings about, “the way our many-languaged lives come up against each other?”

11. What is “language?” Do you have experience communicating in other word-based languages? Are you proficient in any non-word based language (such as music, visual art, mathematics, physics, computer code, or sign language)? Have you “come up against” the lives of people who communicate most proficiently in a language different from yours? What was that like? Having read *Bodega*, in what ways do you see, feel, or think differently about “these united states” now?

12. Reading *Bodega*, were you reminded of any of your own life experiences? How might your own story be in conversation with this poets'? In a conversation about your stories, what question or questions would you ask Su Hwang?

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