

Reading Group Guide

Yasmeen Haddad Loves Joanasi Maqaittik (Baraka Books, 2017)

About the Book

A young woman enters a whole new world of attraction in a community struggling with generations of loss of land and culture.

Yasmeen's tradition-bound mother wants her to stay in Montreal, get married, and have babies. But the young Syrian-Canadian wants more. Her appetite for adventure leads her to a teaching job in the northern Quebec village of Saqijuvik. Eager to adopt her new home and its Inuit inhabitants, Yasmeen embraces every experience that comes her way: camping on the tundra, hunting for ptarmigan, sewing with the local women. She plunges into her northern adventure, no holds barred. But it's 1983 and instead of the ideal, pristine Arctic Yasmeen imagined, she uncovers a contradictory world of igloos and pool halls, Sedna and Jesus, raw caribou and alcohol. In the middle of everything is Joanasi, a beautiful but volatile man who leads her into territory that is almost as unsettling as the land itself.

Yasmeen Haddad Loves Joanasi Maqaittik is a story of powerful love and potent lust. It is a tale of adventure, of the attempt to bridge worlds and cultures, of self-discovery in the face of the unknown. Set in the vast and beautiful North, it pushes past the standard narrative of southerners bringing "civilization" to a people who have survived in the most unforgiving of environments for over a thousand years.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) The novel opens with a scene in the present day as Yasmeen comes face to face with a homeless Inuk in Cabot Park. Why does the novel begin here? How does this scene prepare readers for the events to come?
- 2) Discuss the differences between traditional Inuit culture and the modern world at their doorstep.
- 3) In his final lecture, Yasmeen's professor warns the young teachers heading north not to become "more Eskimo than the Eskimos." What does he mean by that? In her effort to be a principled "Qallunaaq" does Yasmeen ignore his advice?
- 4) Yasmeen rejects her Syrian heritage yet willingly embraces the culture and traditions of Joanasi's people. What "foreign" Inuit customs and rituals are similar to those of Yasmeen's ancestry?

- 5) Compare and contrast Yasmeen and her father. Discuss his influence on her.
- 6) Joanasi and Yasmeen seem like total opposites and yet they forge a bond that is consolidated in their hopes and dreams and in the love they have for one another. What do they learn from each other? Why is their relationship doomed to fail?
- 7) What is the significance of the four main divisions in the book (Rain, Snow, Squall, Thaw)?
- 8) The novel makes multiple references to the moon. List and discuss them in the context of setting.
- 9) Are Paulussie, Joanasi and Tommy victims of colonization or are they individually responsible for their own actions?
- 10) During their hunting trip, Yasmeen begs young Adamie not to forget the traditions of his ancestors. Does Adamie represent a hope for future generations of Inuit men or is the 17-year-old doomed to follow in the footsteps of his older male counterparts?
- 11) In some ways, the Inuit women of Saqjuvik are stronger emotionally than the men of their generation. Discuss with reference to Sarah, Annie and Pasha.
- 12) Yasmeen is accepted into the Inuit family whereas Joanasi is not afforded this same welcome into the Qallunaat world. What does this reveal about Yasmeen's own attitudes?
- 13) Discuss the importance of storytelling in the novel.
- 14) Joanasi and Yasmeen share the telling of the Sedna myth. What does the particular segment they recount reveal about each of them?
- 15) Why does the novel end with Yasmeen's words as she and the homeless man shake hands goodbye?
- 16) How has the novel changed or reaffirmed your views on colonization?

For Further Study

Books

- *All the Way: My Life on Ice*, Jordin Tootoo (2015)
- *Une école à la derive: Essai sur le système d'éducation au Nunavik*, Nicolas Bertrand (2016)
- *The Right to be Cold*, Sheila Watt-Cloutier (2016)
- *Wrestling With Colonialism on Steroids*, Zebedee Nungak (2017)

Films

- *Nanook of the North* (1922)
- *Atanarjuat the Fast Runner* (2001)
- *Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny* (2006)
- *The Experimental Eskimos* (2009)
- *Uvanga* (2014)
- *Okpik's Dream* (2015)
- *So That You Can Stand* (2015)
- *Angry Inuk* (2016)
- *Iqaluit* (2016)
- *The Grizzlies* (2019)