READING GROUP GUIDE

Behold the Many
A Novel
by Lois-Ann Yamanaka


About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about Behold the Many are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach Behold the Many.

About the Book

In 1913, stricken by tuberculosis, young Anah, Aki, and Leah are sent away from their family for treatment at St. Joseph’s, an orphanage in Hawai‘i’s Kalihi Valley. Of the three, two die there, and only Anah, the eldest, survives. But the ghosts of the dead sisters haunt Anah as she prepares to begin married life away from the orphanage. Desperate for the love of their sister, but jealous of her ability to live in the physical world, they are determined to thwart Anah’s happiness. As Anah struggles to appease the dead, it becomes apparent that only through one of her own daughters can redemption be attained.

Poignant, lyrical, and utterly compelling, Behold the Many is a stunning novel that glows with longing and life.
“A mystical, magical, and, at times, macabre world unfolds in Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s elegiac tale of three sisters. . . . A chillingly spectral portrait of souls tormented by love and guilt.”

—Booklist

“A novel with impressive scope and emotional power . . . One’s words can heal, one’s words can hurt. In Yamanaka’s vivid novel Behold the Many, her words do both, breaking our hearts and nursing them back to wholeness with the balm of her prose.”

—The Washington Post Book World

“Tender, poignant, and written in unadorned prose, this is a book to savor.”

—Library Journal

“In this superb seventh novel from Yamanaka, the ghosts of children curse the living, and a young woman finds salvation in early twentieth-century Hawai‘i. . . . Beautifully tragic, this should garner Yamanaka the wider attention she deserves.”

—Kirkus Reviews

About the Author

Lois-Ann Yamanaka is the author of several novels, including Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers, Blu’s Hanging, Heads by Harry, and Father of the Four Passages. She lives in Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is Behold the Many an American story? How does the author use the historical setting (Hawai‘i on the cusp of statehood) to move the story along? Why do you think the author chose this specific time in Hawai‘i’s history as a backdrop for the novel?

2. How would you characterize the narrative structure of Behold the Many? What does it accomplish? How does this narrative reflect the novel’s subject matter? In what ways does the narrative structure remind you of other novels? Is there a common theme to novels written in this narrative?

3. Reexamine the first three pages of the novel. Do you have a different reaction to them now, having read the novel in its entirety? What was your first reaction? Why do you think the author chose to begin the novel this way? What does it accomplish?

4. This novel is very much about mutually inclusive dualities. What are some of the more obvious dualities? What some of the more subtle dualities? What does this overlying theme reveal not only about religion, morality, marriage, family, and culture, but also about Hawai‘i and its history? Can you see these kinds of dualities in your own family, culture and experiences?
5. What are your impressions of Sumi, Anah’s mother? Was she justified in poisoning her husband? What do you think of her as a woman and as a mother? In what ways does she bring out positive qualities in Anah?

6. What does the novel say about religion, specifically Christianity? Do you agree with it? Examine the characters of Sister Mary Deborah and Sister Bernadine. What do they represent, respectively? What does Anah’s nativity/vigil candleholder represent? Why is Anah so taken with The Acts of John?

7. Do you think that Sister Bernadine is a tyrannical hypocrite, or does she truly believe that she is following God’s path and order? Does she remind you of any other fictitious characters? What do you think of the other more frightening characters in the novel, such as Dai (Anah’s father)? How does the author make them human, rather than monsters?

8. Examine the symbolism and metaphor of bees and hives. Why are they so important to Anah? What do they represent to her? “Deborah” is a Hebrew name that means “bee.” What does this contribute to the character of Sister Mary Deborah?

9. If you are familiar with *Jane Eyre*, please compare any similarities between Jane’s experience as a child at a Christian orphanage and Anah’s. Can you find more parallels of themes, plots and characters between the two novels? What does this indicate?

10. What makes Anah such an empathetic character? Discuss the ways in which she personally resonates with you. What do you think of the choices she made, with her sisters, her children, her brother, and within her marriage? Should she have felt guilty about lying to her sisters? What would you have done, had you been in her situations?

11. Could Hosana’s rape and murder have been prevented? Do you believe that she was cursed? What does the novel say about abuse and violence? Consider the character of Charles, and his explanation of the Medeiros family on pages 295—298. What does explaining the family and himself through fairy tales reveal about his perspective?

12. Why did Aki, Leah and Seth need Hosana to be sacrificed in order to be appeased? What does Hosana represent to them? Is there any other way that Anah could have put them at peace?

13. What are your impressions of Anah’s daughters? What do they each represent, to Anah and in the structure of the novel? Does their description on page 301 remind of you of another kind of narrative?

14. What does *Behold the Many* say about tragedy and catharsis? What does it say about marriage and family? Death and birth? Have you experienced emotions or tragedies similar to those of the characters? How much of your own life is reflected within the characters’ relationships, experiences and culture?
15. What were your impressions of Hawai‘i before reading this novel? How have they changed? Were you surprised? If you have visited Hawai‘i, can you recall anything that reminded you of the descriptions in the novel?