BOOK CLUB KIT

THE CHOSEN AND THE BEAUTIFUL

NGHI VO
The questions, discussion topics, and reading list that follow are intended to enhance your reading group’s discussion of *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, Nghi Vo’s dark and magical retelling of *The Great Gatsby*.

1. The novel opens with a wind that blows Jordan and Daisy around “like a pair of young women in white dresses who had no cares to weigh them down.” Are they truly a pair of young women with no cares? Is that how they think of themselves? Does Jordan have a reason to want to be seen like that?

2. While *The Great Gatsby* is written from Nick Carraway’s perspective, *The Chosen and the Beautiful* is written from Jordan Baker’s point of view. Why do you think the author chose Jordan over Nick, or even Daisy? How is the world that Jordan sees different from that of the other characters?

3. Jordan very much considers herself a modern girl, but easily half of the book is taken up with the past, especially her and Daisy’s shared years in Louisville. How does knowing Jordan and Daisy’s past contribute to how you understand them in the present?

4. There are many stories told about Jay Gatsby during the course of the novel. How do these stories work for Gatsby and against him? How do they influence his relationships with the people around him? Which ones do you believe, and why?

5. Despite appearing to be a heterosexual relationship on the surface, Jordan’s relationship with Nick is a relationship between a queer woman and a queer man. What do you think makes this relationship different from one where both people are straight? How does their sexuality play into how they relate to each other, and how does it force them to interact with the world they live in?

6. Jordan’s relationship with Daisy is one of the most important in the book, if not the most important. How would you define Jordan’s relationship with Daisy Buchanan? How do you think Jordan defines it? How does Jordan’s changing relationship with Daisy affect the course of her life?

7. At the end of Jordan’s romance with Nick, she realizes a surprising truth about who he is. Does this alter how you viewed Nick’s actions during the novel?

8. While Daisy Buchanan’s marriage is obviously abusive, the abuse is passed off as a normalized thing, hardly worthy of comment. How does Tom Buchanan’s abuse of his wife impact your reading of Daisy’s affair with Gatsby and then her choice to stay with Tom? Does Jordan’s lack of engagement with said abuse affect how you see her character?
9. The paper-cutting troupe represent a world where Jordan both belongs and yet is still a foreigner. How do Jordan's interactions with the group reveal her feelings about her race and her sexuality? What steps is Jordan going to have to take to be as fluent in that space as she is at Gatsby’s parties?

10. One reason we continue to read *The Great Gatsby* is because so many of the themes it explores are universal and continue to be relevant in our world today. While both Fitzgerald and Vo write about issues like money, class, ambition, identity, and how the past inescapably informs the present, what aspects of these issues does Vo address in her version of the story that Fitzgerald leaves comparatively unexamined in his?

11. Even in a world drowned in magic, nothing compares with Gatsby’s parties. If you found yourself on the grounds of Gatsby’s mansion in the summer of 1922, what would you want to see, and what would you be doing? What’s the most magical party you’ve ever been to?

12. The novel covers one eventful summer in the lives of the characters. For those who survive the end of it, where do you think they go from there? What is Jordan going to be like in her thirties, during the Depression, or her forties, during the Second World War?

13. Almost a hundred years separates us from Fitzgerald’s time—and Gatsby’s—but sometimes it feels as if very little has changed. What similarities do you see between the 1920s and the 2020s? Do you relate to the struggles and challenges faced by Jordan and the people she cares about? How does Gatsby’s American dream persist in our current society?

**ADDITIONAL SUGGESTED READING:**

- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*
- Maureen Corrigan, *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why It Endures*
- KJ Charles, *The Will Darling Adventures*
- Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies*
- Silvia Moreno-Garcia, *Mexican Gothic*
- Wendy Rouse, *The Children of Chinatown*
- Carlyle Van Thompson, *The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination*
- Kate Beaton, this comic from *Hark! A Vagrant “Great Gatsbys”*

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**Vo is available for virtual meetings with book clubs and for school and library visits! Please email nghivo.com/contact for her availability and rates.**

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Guide by Nghi Vo

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While Jordan Baker’s position as a glamorous outsider shapes her life in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, Asian Americans have been a part of America’s history for hundreds of years. However, most of the other Asian Americans in the book would have had a lot more in common with the Toy sisters in Louisville or the papercutting troupe Jordan encounters at Gatsby’s mansion than with Jordan’s own privileged existence, and it’s their experience that parallels that of Asian Americans living in our own reality.

Following World War I, American nationalism and anti-Asian sentiment was on the rise. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 saw the end of the United States’ free immigration policy, and the Asian Exclusion Act, included as part of the Immigration Act of 1924, essentially ended Chinese immigration to the United States and put severe limits on the number of other Asian immigrants allowed into the country. These laws indicated the public acceptance of racism against Asians. In *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, the passing of the fictional Manchester Act is based on those real pieces of legislation and their heartbreaking and terrifying effect on the Asian American community at the time.

At the same time that Asians were the subject of exclusion and persecution both in the courts and in the streets, the United States was developing a fascination with the “Orient,” an exoticized picture of Asia. Mahjong entered the United States during the twenties and gained immense popularity, while chop suey restaurants developed a new cachet as trendy places to see and be seen. But while Asian goods and cultural exports were welcome, the presence of Asian people was still always questioned.

The 1920s also saw the flourishing of Asian Americans in entertainment, such as the vaudevillian and actor Lee Tung Foo, also known as Frank Lee, and the glamorous Anna May Wong, born Wong Liu Tsong, who rose to stardom in 1924 with a supporting role in *The Thief of Baghdad*. Both Lee and Wong built careers out of playing Asian stereotypes, the only roles that were available to them, but they simultaneously paved the way for the vibrant and widely recognized Asian American performing arts community that would come after them.

Other Asian American artists made careers out of subverting expectations, as in the case of the Chung Hwa Four, a barbershop quartet comprising four Chinese American singers. Organized in San Francisco, Lee Tung Li, Leong Hui Kim, Don Tin Yaw, and Chan Suey Ting, also known as Henry Lee, Hugh Liang, Edgar Don Sang, and Chan Shu Yin, became one of the most notable acts of the decade. They were known for their trick of inviting an audience to sing along in Chinese before joking, “Gee, maybe you don’t like Chinese songs. We’ll sing something American.” The Chung Hwa Four lasted fourteen years on
the vaudeville circuit, no mean feat considering the fact they were considered a novelty act in a cutthroat business.

Khai, Bai, and the rest of the papercutting troupe draw their genesis from the work of performers like Lee, Wong, and the Chung Hwa Four, who were starting what would come to be known as the chop suey circuit. During the Roaring Twenties, the nightclub scene—where performers could earn the most money and acclaim—was starkly segregated. While Black and Asian artists might be allowed to perform, they could not mingle, and the first truly desegregated nightclub didn’t open its doors until 1938. The efforts of marginalized performers in the 1920s would bear fruit in the decades to come, fruit that some of them would live to see and to eat.

Like Khai, Bai, and some of the other performers in their troupe, Jordan is Vietnamese; she states that she was born in Tonkin, which refers to the French protectorate of northern Vietnam. While there were fewer Vietnamese in the United States in the twenties than there were Asians from other regions, there were still some! The presence of the Vietnamese in the United States is widely believed to have begun with the waves of refugees in the late 1970s, but the truth is rarely so simple. During the period between the first and second World Wars, Vietnamese people did enter the country, and the ones who did so were usually either very wealthy tourists or poor workers. Due to French colonialism, wealthy Vietnamese were often educated in Paris and then proceeded to tour the Western world with New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans being frequent ports of call.

Less fortunate were the Vietnamese workers who found employment on French steamships, which would take them to Paris and from there on to any number of foreign ports. Some of those workers, occasionally incorrectly assumed to be Chinese or Japanese, found their way to the United States. The welcome they received ranged from warm to ice-cold, but their stories form part of the rich tapestry that is part and parcel of the Asian experience in the United States.

Much like Anna May Wong, who left the United States to find acclaim abroad, Jordan ends *The Chosen and the Beautiful* by leaving an America that has proved hostile to her. At the same time, however, she claims her place in a deeply American narrative and as a deeply American young woman.

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**FURTHER READING:**

Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s*


**THE CORPSE REVIVER**

The corpse reviver is what Jordan drinks the most in *The Chosen and the Beautiful*. The name didn’t originally refer to a specific cocktail, but rather a category of named drinks that were drunk as hangover cures because they could revive even the dead (not literally, although it has been tried). The version Jordan would have been drinking would be closest to what is known today as Corpse Reviver #2:

- 3/4 ounce gin (Plymouth or London dry)
- 3/4 ounce Cointreau
- 3/4 ounce Lillet Blanc or Cocchi Americano
- 3/4 ounce lemon juice
- A dash of absinthe

Shake with ice and strain into a chilled cocktail glass. Alternately, you can rinse the glass with absinthe or pastis before pouring rather than adding the dash of absinthe afterward.

**THE MINT JULEP**

The mint julep needs no introduction, but for Louisville girls like Daisy and Jordan, this iconic drink would have been synonymous with their Southern roots. Traditionally served in silver or pewter cups over ice, it was an upper-class beverage that first became popular in the late eighteenth century and has been beloved ever since. The mint julep is also one of the easiest and most popular mocktails to make.

- 12 fresh mint leaves
- 1/3 ounce simple syrup (or 1 tsp–1 tbsp of sugar dissolved 2:1 in water, according to taste)
- 2 1/2 ounces bourbon whiskey
- Crushed ice

Shake all ingredients with ice and strain into a chilled half glass or cup of crushed ice, stir, add more crushed ice to fill the glass or cup, and garnish with a sprig of fresh mint. Alternately, many recipes specify to muddle the mint by placing it in the bottom of the cup or glass with the sugar or simple syrup before adding the bourbon and ice.

Non-alcoholic version: Substitute sparkling water or ginger ale for bourbon and add lemon juice or syrup to taste; can also be made using fresh lemonade instead of bourbon.
GINGER WATER

A delicious and refreshing non-alcoholic drink, ginger water is made by adding ginger juice to seltzer or sparkling water along with some kind of sweetener such as sugar or honey, and optional extras like lemon or mint.

THE GIN RICKEY

No list of Prohibition-era drinks would be complete without a gin cocktail of some kind, in this case the gin rickey, which everyone imbibes before the tense dinner with Gatsby at Tom and Daisy’s East Egg mansion. Named after Colonel Joseph “Joe” Kyle Rickey, a Democratic lobbyist, the first Rickey was created in the 1880s after a bartender at Shoemaker’s Bar in Washington, DC saw him squeeze lime into his whisky before adding soda. The recipe is extremely simple:

- Gin
- Freshly squeezed lime juice
- Club soda or seltzer water

Mix to taste and serve in a highball or other tall glass over ice, garnished with lime. Some people choose to add sugar or simple syrup but the classic version is only the three ingredients above. For a non-alcoholic version, simply leave out the gin. You can also try a flavored tonic water, such as Fever-Tree’s elderflower, to make the mocktail more interesting!
The history of papercutting actually predates the invention of paper. Paper was invented in China sometime during the Eastern Han Dynasty, around 100 CE, by a palace official in the court of Emperor He known as Cai Lun. While papercutting was first officially documented by the sixth century, the shapes and themes that characterize the art hearken back to decorative cuttings made using thin leather, fabric, silver foil, and even leaves.

In *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, papercutting magic appears as a marker of Jordan Baker’s lost homeland, something at once beautiful and frightening that ties her to a heritage she has never known. For Jordan, in a world drowning in wonder, the art of papercutting is a link to her past. In our own world, the history of papercutting likewise leads us to a rich tradition of folk art and storytelling.

Today, papercutting is recognized as a fine art, but the cheapness and wide availability of paper has made it one that could be refined and enjoyed by people at all levels of society, and many different styles of papercutting can be found throughout the world. In China, papercutting is known as jianzhi. Historically it has been divided into the northern style and the southern style: where papercutting in the north prioritizes smooth evocative lines, papercutting in the south is more elaborate, concentrating on very detailed creations using very delicate lines.

Most of the earliest Chinese papercutting artists were illiterate. Instead of adorning their walls with calligraphy or fine paintings, they decorated their living spaces with attractive paper cuts produced from the materials they had at hand. Many of the designs were comparatively simple, but others were pieces of great beauty featuring flowers, animals, and intricate geometric shapes.

Although there were some artists who sold their work professionally, papercutting was also considered a craft suitable for anyone who could hold a sharp knife or a pair of scissors. It uses the same skills and many of the same tools as fabric cutwork and counted-thread embroidery, and women looking to decorate their homes gravitated towards the graceful forms shaped from colorful paper. These works could be displayed year round, but they were very popular around the Lunar New Year, when paper cuts would be pasted in fresh paper windows to welcome a new beginning.

While China claims the invention of modern paper, papercutting as an art is a global phenomenon. The secret of paper-making emerged in Europe during the 13th century, and today there are many papercutting traditions of note. In Germany, there is scherenschnitte, where paper may be folded and then cut to produce art with repeating geometric motifs. The folded snowflake that so many children learn to cut is an example of German scherenschnitte. Papercutting is also considered a Jewish folk art dating back to the Middle Ages, where papercutting designs were used to adorn marriage contracts and as holiday decorations. In Japan, papercutting developed very quickly after the introduction of paper. Japanese papercutting, known as kirie or kirigami, covers many different styles and produced related art forms, like kamikiri, a performance where an artist cuts paper while taking suggestions from the audience.

Far from being a thing of the past, papercutting is an art that has moved with the times. No longer restricted to knives and scissors alone, modern papercutting artists make use of everything from stamps, stencils and die-cutters to holographic paper, multiple layers of exceedingly thin, fine paper, and globally sourced designs. Where once papercuts were simply pasted to windows, today they may be framed, mounted and folded as pieces of 3D art or added to products ranging from furniture to electronic devices.

On the following pages you will find instructions for how to get started making your own papercutting art, along with several designs to print or trace!

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**FURTHER READING:**

Resources for Papercutting: [https://papercutters.org/about-papercutting-2/](https://papercutters.org/about-papercutting-2/)
All About Papercutting: [https://www.allaboutpapercutting.com/resources/](https://www.allaboutpapercutting.com/resources/)
Origami.me: Eastern-style origami dragons: [https://origami.me/eastern-dragons/](https://origami.me/eastern-dragons/)
Béatrice Coron: [https://beatricecoron.com/links.html](https://beatricecoron.com/links.html)
Khai, Bai, and the rest of the papercutting troupe make papercutting look easy, and while it takes years to learn to make the intricate paper cuts that they have mastered, there’s nothing stopping you from making simpler designs for your own home!

GATHER YOUR TOOLS

While you can cut paper designs with nothing more than a stable surface and a craft knife, there are some other tools that can help you get a clearer, cleaner end result. A cutting mat and masking or artist’s tape will make things much easier for you.

CHOOSING YOUR PAPER

You can make paper cuts with nearly any paper. Your local craft store will have plenty of decorative papers to choose from or you can look around your house for spare paper that might work for this purpose. Remember that it is easier to cut thin paper than thick paper, but thin paper is easier to tear. Printer paper is actually a bad choice for this art as it blunts your craft knife very quickly.

PICKING A DESIGN

You can freehand a sketch on the back of your decorative paper or you can use a stencil to create your desired design. There are also kits that come with designs printed onto the decorated paper, and you can simply cut them out directly. Remember that when applying a design to the back of the paper that it should be reversed so that it is correct when the paper cut is turned over to the right side.

SECURE YOUR WORK

Tape your work to a cutting mat using masking or artist’s tape. If you are working with a stencil, put your decorative paper down first, and then place the stencil on top of it, securing them with tape. This prevents the paper from slipping and allows you to make cuts with confidence. Some people like to cut from the back of a piece of paper while others like to cut from the front- in general, the side of the paper facing down as you cut will have a neater look.

CUT, CUT, CUT

Using your craft knife, start by cutting out the smallest pieces of the design first. As the larger pieces are removed, the paper becomes less stable, and the smaller pieces will be harder to do. Work from the center of the design out to the edges. As you get to the larger pieces of the design, turn your work so that you are still making controlled cuts. Remove the pieces as you go so you can see your progress. If you accidentally cut through an element of the design, you can always repair it with a tiny sliver of tape applied afterwards from the back.

FINISHING UP

When your design is cut out completely, remove it from the mat. At this point, you can frame it with another decorative piece of paper behind it, tape it to a window or glue it to something that needs to be a little prettier!
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PEACH

Symbol of Immortality, Marriage, Springtime