



FLATIRON
BOOKS
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The Book of Everlasting Things Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *The Book of Everlasting Things*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *The Book of Everlasting Things*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. The novel's title comes from Samir Khan's desire to write a book about "love, and other intangible things that are passed down from generation to generation, like memory or myth. Things that are not eclipsed by life or death. Everlasting things." Discuss how the title echoes throughout the story.
2. *The Book of Everlasting Things* takes place across the world, from Lahore to Paris to Grasse and at many stops along the way. How do these different landscapes shape the characters and story? Did you have a favorite setting?
3. During Samir's apprenticeship, his uncle Vivek tells him, "People—the inspiration, the admirer, the wearer—were fundamental to the creation of perfume. . . . One cannot create a perfume for a place, that dialogue is unsustainable. The place can be inspiration, but a perfume is *always* created for people in general, or a person in particular. And our memories, our histories, our desires, our fears, and even our interactions are like any other ingredient." What do you think he means? How does his advice play out over the course of the novel, in Samir's own work with perfume?
4. In the lead-up to Partition, Mushtaq Alam warns his friends: "This war we have embarked on against one another is most dangerous, for it is a war against our own. Neighbor against neighbor, colleague against colleague, brother against brother, Congress Party against Muslim League." How is the city of Lahore changed by Partition? Were you reminded of other conflicts when reading about the history of Partition in these pages? If so, discuss.
5. Firdaus's parents, Zainab and Altaf, have very different worldviews that lead them to treat their daughter's relationship with Samir in very different ways—yet, both ultimately urge her to end it. Discuss the ways in which Firdaus is shaped by each of her parents and how their advice changes the course of her life.
6. In her unsent letter to Samir, Firdaus writes, "At such a time, when I should have revolted, I chose duty over desire. This has remained my biggest regret." Why does Firdaus choose to abandon Samir? What does she gain and lose? What effects does that choice have on the rest of her life?

7. Over the course of the novel, we learn Vivek's backstory through his journals. In one passage, Vivek writes, "The stories of our sipahis will disappear into history, buried like the many bodies in this unknown land. But history must remember that we were here too. We were here too." Why do you think the author chose to include Vivek's story in such depth? How does it resonate with Samir and Firdaus's story?
8. Samir comes to see Vivek's desertion from the battlefield as "not just to be his greatest act of cowardice, but also his very first act of self-preservation." What does he mean? Do you agree?
9. As Samir reads through Vivek's journals, he realizes that "history was never just about the events that had once transpired. It was also about who narrated the events and who heard them; who wielded time, fashioned the years, lived, or resisted them; and who ultimately was bequeathed the archive." How does this idea play out not just in the journals, but in the novel itself? How much control do you think the characters have over the way their stories are passed down and understood?
10. When Samir asks Rose sahib about the role perfumers can play in war, he responds, "[We] fought another kind of war; a resistance war. We were the soldiers of beauty and art. . . . We bottled memory, painted paradise, wrote on all that was being forgotten, transcribed the world we were witnessing. . . . It might seem an insignificant undertaking, when compared to fighting in a battlefield, but it was also essential. *This* is what art did, what music did, what perfume did, it elevated human life during crisis. *We* were the transporters, we took people *somewhere else*." Does his perspective resonate with you? Why or why not?
11. Compare and contrast Vivek's relationship to Ambrette and Samir's to Firdaus. Why do you think Samir is so profoundly affected by the revelation of his uncle's marriage, leading him to visit Ambrette's grave week after week?
12. How is Firdaus's marriage to Fahad similar and different to Samir's marriage to Léa? How do both relationships compare to the bond between Firdaus and Samir? Do you think they act selfishly toward their spouses, or do you understand their behavior?
13. In one of their last conversations as a couple, Samir tells Léa, "But without memory, there is nothing. Without memory, we are nothing." Discuss the ways in which Samir and Léa are affected by their memories of the past, particularly the people they've lost, and how that ultimately pulls them apart.
14. Firdaus has hyposmia, or smell blindness, toward the scents of certain flowers, including roses. How does that affect her relationship with Samir and her feelings about him? How important do you think it is to be able to understand and share in a loved one's work and interests?
15. Both Firdaus and Samir are adamant that their grandchildren not try to seek out the other, even as they know they don't have many years left. Why do you think they feel this way? Do you sympathize?

16. In his final letter to his granddaughter, Samir writes, “Take care of yourself and do not be afraid of love, as I was. . . . Celebrate the gift that nature has given you, use it, wield it, *ma chérie*. But do not ever let it consume you or dictate the actions of your life. You are so much more than your nose.” What do you think the future looks like for Anouk and for Samir Khan? How might their relationship to perfume, memory, and history be different than it was for their grandparents?