

Reading Group Guide

All the Fishes Come Home to Roost by Rachel Manija Brown

1. Mani devours books from a very early age, and falls in love with the fantasy genre as well as Indian stories of warriors and gods. Her flights of fancy seem to provide something more than simple escapism. How do games like Dungeons & Dragons and fantasy stories such as *The Blue Sword* and *The Mists of Avalon* and the characters they contain help shape Mani's identity?
2. The 1970s in America was a decade during which social conventions were challenged. By all appearances, Mani's mother and father are part of that counter-culture; yet there are many aspects of life at the ashram that go against freedom, especially gender equality. At one point, Mani states that according to Baba's teachings, God is not allowed to be a woman. Compare and contrast life in 1970s-era American hippie culture with life in Ahmednagar.
3. It's clear that Mani has tremendous respect for her Grandpa Artie, who does not subscribe to Baba's doctrine. When the mandali discuss the time Baba asked them if they would kill one of their relatives for him, Mani recalls her Grandpa Artie's words of advice: "You should never do something just because someone else tells you to. Not even if it's the president of the United States." Knowing what we know about Grandpa Artie's past, discuss the cultural and moral significance of this statement.
4. Grandpa Artie was instrumental in cultivating Mani's relationship with nature, which she cites as one of the only truly healthy, valuable experiences of her childhood in Ahmednagar. However, her love of creatures great and small is not always appreciated by the community, especially where snakes are concerned. Is her compassion toward animals related to her feelings about people?
5. With which female does Mani most closely identify? Why?
6. There are many factors that contribute to Mani's feelings of isolation and confusion: she's the only Western child at the ashram; she attends Catholic school where she's in the minority (and must wear a hat); and she reads English at a very high level but can't read or speak Hindi well. To top it off, her parents subscribe to a religion that downplays the importance of individual feelings, making it almost impossible for her to express herself. How does Mani's frustration surface?
7. It could be argued that Mani has very little in common with her mother; but like Mani, her mother was also something of a misfit in search of her place. She was a struggling "ethnic-looking" actress who didn't fit the Hollywood mold—and, Mani strongly suspects that her mother was a victim of abuse. These factors could contribute to feelings of social isolation. Are there similarities between how Mani deals with isolation and her mother's decision to become a Baba-lover?
8. Baba-lovers don't believe that people are responsible for their own actions; rather, everything that happens is part of Baba's plan. Mani blames this belief for her mother's seeming indifference toward the abuse that happens at school, among other things. Do you agree?
9. Should children in general be encouraged to choose their own religion? Does Mani's story challenge/affirm your own feelings about organized religion?
10. Which revelations from the three Interlude chapters helped your understanding of Mani and her family the most?
11. Says Baba-lover Carla, "The end of the world means the end of our preconceived notions and mental garbage. It means we face up to who we are and what we've been doing. When Baba breaks his silence, all the fishes will come home to roost." Mani corrects her (*chickens* roost), then has a cathartic thought: "What would happen if I broke *my* silence?" Discuss Mani as a truth-seeker. How does she subvert the oppressive culture of Ahmednagar? How does she come to grips with her

childhood and how do her powers of logic, self-esteem, imagination, and “real-world” knowledge figure in this process?

12. Why is the letter Mani receives from Nancy, the English teacher, so important to her? What is its impact on her life?
13. Rachel Manija Brown treats her childhood with a good deal of humor in *All the Fishes Come Home to Roost*. In the final chapter, she points to Augusten Burroughs’ *Running With Scissors* as a source of inspiration. Do you sense that her irreverent outlook evolved after she reached adulthood? Is there evidence that suggests this attitude or coping strategy was always present?
14. Discuss the author’s decision to include her parents’ opinions about her memoir inside its final chapters.
15. Has she forgiven her parents?