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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Buried by Peter Hessler

Summary

Drawn by a fascination with Egypt's rich history and culture, Peter Hessler moved with his wife and twin daughters to Cairo in 2011. He wanted to learn Arabic, explore Cairo's neighborhoods, and visit the legendary archaeological digs of Upper Egypt. After his years of covering China for *The New Yorker*, friends warned him Egypt would be a much quieter place. But not long before he arrived, the Egyptian Arab Spring had begun, and now the country was in chaos.

In the midst of the revolution, Hessler often traveled to digs at Amarna and Abydos, where locals live beside the tombs of kings and courtiers, a landscape that they call simply al-Madfuna: "the Buried." He and his wife set out to master Arabic, striking up a friendship with their instructor, a cynical political sophisticate. They also befriended Peter's translator, a gay man struggling to find happiness in Egypt's homophobic culture. A different kind of friendship was formed with the neighborhood garbage collector, an illiterate but highly perceptive man named Sayyid, whose access to the trash of Cairo would be its own kind of archaeological excavation. Hessler also met a family of Chinese small-business owners in the lingerie trade; their view of the country proved a bracing counterpoint to the West's conventional wisdom.

Through the lives of these and other ordinary people in a time of tragedy and heartache, and through connections between contemporary Egypt and its ancient past, Hessler creates an astonishing portrait of a country and its people. What emerges is a book of uncompromising intelligence and humanity—the story of a land in which a weak state has collapsed but its underlying society remains in many ways painfully the same.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you like this book? Did it engage you? How did you feel while you were reading it – intrigued, bored, emotional ...?
2. Were you drawn to a book about Egypt's past and present or were you a reluctant reader?
3. Have you traveled to Egypt or lived abroad? If you have, how did your experience compare with that of Peter's family? If you haven't, would you want to if the opportunity presented itself?

4. Were you more interested in the history of Egypt or the present day experiences of Peter and his family?
5. Who was your favorite “character” among the people Peter and his family met?
6. *Kirkus Reviews* wrote that this book presented “a view of Egyptian politics that sometimes seems to look at everything but and that opens onto an endlessly complex place and people.” Do you agree or disagree that Peter focused less on the politics of Arab Spring and more on the people he encountered?
7. What are your thoughts about the structure of this book? Did it compel you to keep reading? Did you find it confusing or distracting?
8. What were the recurring themes? How did the author relate the past to the present?
9. What will you remember about this book a year from now?
10. If you could ask the author a question about this book, what would it be? Have you read other books or *New Yorker* articles by the author? If not, does this book inspire you to seek out others that he wrote?

Summary from the Publisher
Discussion Questions from the staff of the Johnston Public Library