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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Camel Bookmobile by Masha Hamilton

Summary

Fiona Sweeney wants to do something that matters, and she chooses to make her mark in the arid bush of northeastern Kenya. By helping to start a traveling library, she hopes to bring the words of Homer, Hemingway, and Dr. Seuss to far-flung tiny communities where people live daily with drought, hunger, and disease.

Her intentions are honorable, and her rules are firm: due to the limited number of donated books, if any one of them is not returned, the bookmobile will not return. But, encumbered by her Western values, Fi does not understand the people she seeks to help.

And in the impoverished small community of Mididima, she finds herself caught in the middle of a volatile local struggle when the bookmobile's presence sparks a dangerous feud between the proponents of modernization and those who fear the loss of traditional ways.

Discussion Questions

1. One of the main conflicts in the book is between Fi and the library proponents versus those who fear the imposition of Western values and the loss of centuries of tradition. Can *The Camel Bookmobile* be seen as an allegory for what's still taking place elsewhere in the world today? What does the novel say about the experience of being an American overseas?
2. What is gained (or lost) by the use of multiple viewpoints to tell this story? How do the various viewpoints weave together to reinforce the theme of books as instruments of change and growth?
3. Each character is changed in some way by the bookmobile. Discuss those changes. Specifically, Fi goes to Kenya convinced that she is bringing knowledge to the African bush, but in the end she learns at least as much as any other character. What are the most important lessons she learns?
4. The mosquito quotes, though carefully attributed, are actually invented. What do they add to the sections they precede?

5. In some ways, the novel is peopled by outsiders. Fi is an interloper in Kenya, Scar Boy is a recluse, and even Matani, by virtue of having been educated elsewhere, is an outsider. Does the novel suggest that outsiders have a role to play in changing their societies? Do you agree?
6. There is a real camel library that operates out of Garissa. Why do you think the author chose to fictionalize this story as opposed to writing about the real camel bookmobile? What are the advantages and disadvantages of that decision?
7. Many of the people of Mididima make it clear that they do not want to be seen as ignorant simply because they are illiterate. At the novel's end, the traditional values seem to win out. What does the ending say to you?
8. If Mididima had become a settled community, what would have been lost? And do you think books and modernism will continue to impact the people of Mididima, even beyond the novel's conclusion?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.