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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry by Gabrielle Zevin

#### Summary

In the spirit of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* and *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, Gabrielle Zevin's enchanting novel is a love letter to the world of books—and booksellers—that changes our lives by giving us the stories that open our hearts and enlighten our minds.

On the faded Island Books sign hanging over the porch of the Victorian cottage is the motto "No Man Is an Island; Every Book Is a World." A. J. Fikry, the irascible owner, is about to discover just what that truly means.

A. J. Fikry's life is not at all what he expected it to be. His wife has died, his bookstore is experiencing the worst sales in its history, and now his prized possession, a rare collection of Poe poems, has been stolen. Slowly but surely, he is isolating himself from all the people of Alice Island—from Lambiase, the well-intentioned police officer who's always felt kindly toward Fikry; from Ismay, his sister-in-law who is hell-bent on saving him from his dreary self; from Amelia, the lovely and idealistic (if eccentric) Knightley Press sales rep who keeps on taking the ferry over to Alice Island, refusing to be deterred by A.J.'s bad attitude.

Even the books in his store have stopped holding pleasure for him. These days, A.J. can only see them as a sign of a world that is changing too rapidly.

And then a mysterious package appears at the bookstore. It's a small package, but large in weight. It's that unexpected arrival that gives A. J. Fikry the opportunity to make his life over, the ability to see everything anew.

It doesn't take long for the locals to notice the change overcoming A.J.; or for that determined sales rep, Amelia, to see her curmudgeonly client in a new light; or for the wisdom of all those books to become again the lifeblood of A.J.'s world; or for everything to twist again into a version of his life that he didn't see coming.

As surprising as it is moving, *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry* is an unforgettable tale of transformation and second chances, an irresistible affirmation of why we read, and why we love.



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## Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the story, Amelia says she is considering quitting online dating. How would you compare the act of buying books online to the act of dating online? Is it relevant to the story that Amelia meets her eventual husband in a very analog location, a bookstore?
2. Consider the setting. Why do you think the author chooses to set the book on an island? How does the island setting reflect A.J.'s character?
3. Perhaps oddly, vampires are a recurring motif in the story: for example, when A.J.'s wife throws the vampire prom and when A.J. watches *True Blood* to court Amelia. What do you make of the references to vampires?
4. Lambiase moves from an occasional or nonreader, to a reader, to a bookseller. How do you think becoming a reader changes him? Consider the scene where he decides not to. Questions for Discussion 9 confront Ismay about the backpack. Do you think Lambiase's reaction is different than it would have been if he hadn't taken up reading?
5. The author chooses to begin each chapter with a description of a short story. Discuss some of the ways the stories relate to the chapters with which they are paired. Is A.J. creating a canon for Maya? How does the book itself function as a kind of canon? If these are A.J.'s favorites, what do they say about A.J. as a reader and as a man?
6. Did you find Ismay's motivations for stealing Tamerlane to be forgivable? How do you think she should pay for her crime? Why do you think Lambiase lets her off?
7. At one point, Maya speculates that perhaps "your whole life is determined by what store you get left in" (page 85). Is it the people or the place that makes the difference?
8. When did you become aware that Leon Friedman might be an imposter? What did you make of Leonora Ferris's reasons for hiring him?
9. How do you think Daniel Parrish might have changed if he had lived? Do you think some people never change?
10. Were you surprised by the outcome of the short story contest? What do you think of A.J.'s comments to Maya about why certain books and stories win prizes and others don't? Does the knowledge that a book has won a prize attract you to reading it?
11. Compare Maya's "fiction" about the last day of her mother's life to Ismay's version. Which do you consider to be more accurate and why?



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12. How do you think the arrival of the e-reader is related to the denouement of the story? Is A.J. a man who cannot exist in a world with e-books? What do you think of e-books? Do you prefer reading in e- or on paper?
13. At one point, A.J. asks Maya, “Is a twist less satisfying if you know it’s coming? Is a twist that you can’t predict symptomatic of bad construction?” What do you think of this statement in view of the plot of *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry*? Did you guess who Maya’s father was? If so, what were the clues?
14. The author chooses to end the novel with a new sales rep coming to an Island Books that is no longer owned by A.J. What do you make of this ending?
15. What do you think the future holds for physical books and bookstores?

Discussion Questions from the publisher