

Readers' Guide for *Ancestor Stones* by Aminatta Forna

1. In speaking of her marriage, Asana states “I learned about women—how we are made into the women we become, how we shape ourselves, how we shape each other” (p. 107). Using this quote as a springboard, begin your discussion by considering the central role of women in the patriarchal society portrayed in the novel. Is their crucial role something of a paradox? What are some of the specific roles that women undertake? Throughout the novel we learn much about the complex hierarchical system of marriage. How do the women support each other and how do they undermine one another? Note that the word “Ores” means both co-wife and rival.
2. At the beginning of the novel Abie returns to her childhood home of Rofathane from London and strains to hear the voices of the past “but the layers of years between us were too many” (p. 10). What does she mean by this? What is Abie’s role in the novel? Do you find her to be a satisfying and fully-fleshed character? Are the stories of her four aunts perhaps more accessible when filtered through Abie?
3. When Abie reads the letter she states that it is written in English “but the words, the sensibility was Africa.” (p. 8). How far could this statement apply to the whole novel? Think about the story that Abie tells at the beginning of the novel about different ways of seeing. Consider also cultural differences between the West and the African society depicted.
4. One of the striking images in the first pages of the novel is of Gibril Umaru Kholifa’s iron four-poster bed being carried by eight men through the forest. How is the patriarch portrayed by his daughters? What are their relationships, their memories of his public persona v. his private moments? Would you consider him a good father? How do the opinions of the sisters regarding their father change as they mature, and outside influences enter their lives?
5. What do the ancestor stones of the title represent? How do they fit in with Asana’s statement that “there are many ways of looking at the same thing.” (p. 236). Consider how important they are to Mary’s mother. Explore the importance of names in connection with the stones, and throughout the rest of the novel, especially reflected in the character of Mary. What is Mary’s given name and when is it changed, and changed back? Does she think of herself as Mary? Why do you think she is referred to as Mary in the chapter headings?
6. Told as a series of stories, this novel celebrates the oral tradition. Whose work is “the guarding of stories” (p. 12) and why? Think of some of the different ways in which stories are told and used throughout the novel from the scare-tactic tales of Asana’s grandmother to rumor-mongering about Serah’s mother. Discuss the

- place of truth and memory in the telling of stories. “What story shall I tell? The story of how it really was, or the one you want to hear?” (p. 15).
7. Consider the theme of silence as it runs through the stories. Recall why Mary was banished from going to the women’s meetings once she learned how to talk. Can you think of instances in the novel where “words once uttered never die” (p. 62) and loose talk causes dramatic upheavals in the sisters’ lives? What about later in the book during the dangers of the civil war? How does voting fit into the theme of silence? What is the role of Bobbio, the boy with no voice?
 8. In many ways, Asana, daughter of Ya Namina, represents the old way of life before the changes wrought by the 20th century. What is her relationship with her mother? Why does she head so blindly into her disastrous marriage? How has Asana’s opinion of her mother changed by the end of the novel? What profound realization occurs when she catches sight of her mother mourning, and what does it give Asana the strength to do?
 9. Mary says “We deserted our gods . . . My mother would not yield. And to this day nobody has ever come to me and said she was noble and righteous to do so” (p. 36). In what ways does Mary’s life reflect the seeming desertion of the gods of her childhood? In which ways does she find comfort in her early beliefs? Find examples of the blending of the old and the new in Mary’s faith and practice of religion.
 10. Hawa seems to attract bad luck and indeed her life is filled with unlucky events. In tracing the details of her misfortunes, do you see patterns beginning to occur? How much of her misery does she make herself? Think back to the best day of her life, “the day every one of my father’s wives wished she was my mother. And everyone of his daughters wanted to be me” (p. 68). What do these feelings show about her character? When she says about Khalil, “I loved him so much I sacrificed my own happiness” (p. 191) do you empathize with her or are you irritated by her actions? What about when she waits in vain for her soldier son to visit?
 11. During her childhood, Serah rejects her mother when she is accused of adultery “I no longer wanted her for my mother” (p. 101). As Serah grows up and makes her own mistakes in life what is the irony of this rejection? At what point does she realize how much she owes her mother and how alike they are? Consider Serah’s statement “I preferred to make my way alone than live with unhappiness” (p. 233) and discuss the ways she demonstrates this independence throughout her life.
 12. Serah is one of the new generation who left their country without looking “back at the old, only forward to the vision of the new” (p. 214). To what extent is Serah able to leave her old way of life behind? How does she find herself caught between two worlds? Consider her relationships with Janneh and Ambrose. What do the red shoes represent? In the 40 years that pass between her two experiences

- as a returning officer at a voting station how has Serah changed? How has Africa changed? Are there reflections of the world Serah knew from her childhood in the tense atmosphere of the voting station? Recall the women singing.
13. As Asana says about Rofathane, “change came slowly to this place” (p. 121). Talk about examples of the way in which the western world started to infiltrate the society of the village, from Asana’s stories of the moon-shadow man to the arrival of Mr. Blue and the mining companies. How did the creep of colonialism affect the lives of the sisters?
 14. As the novel follows the sisters and they move beyond the reach of Rofathane their family history becomes entwined with the history of a nation. How has their childhood prepared them for this future? Do any of the sisters surprise you with their actions? How far do you agree with Asana’s statement that her great-granddaughter “had arrived in a world where suddenly we were all lost, as helpless as newborns” (p. 297).
 15. Consider the ways in which the author forces the sisters to confront and reflect on their own identities, and the ways in which they are viewed by others. Why is this especially important to Mary’s story? Discuss her experience in England, the country with “so many mirrors” (p. 206) where “nobody looks me in the eye” (p. 206). What are her feelings when she returns home, and why? Why does she feel the need to communicate her story to Abie? How does her story mirror the story of Africa itself?
 16. Towards the end of the novel Serah says “Sometimes I think this is what happened to our country. Nobody heeded the warnings, nobody smelled the rain coming . . . until we were engulfed by it” (p. 264). Find instances from the lives of the four women of this constant refusal to admit the truth. The author often uses images of stopping up the senses to portray this smothering of the truth: “I plugged my ears with imaginary mud” (p. 64) and Serah covering the smells of poverty with the scent of flowers (p.225). Discuss other examples.
 17. “We were like a collection of differently colored and shaped bottles,” (p. 168) says Serah of the various children raised by her grandmother. How fitting a description of the upbringing of the sisters is this? How are the sisters alike, how different? Do they become more or less alike as the novel progresses? Discuss the role of parenting in general in the novel.
 18. At the end of the novel, Abie finds that she is no longer a stranger in Rofathane, and says that “in this small world everybody had a place” (p. 314). Asana states that at Rofathane there existed “An imperfect order. An order we understood” (p. 294). How far do you agree with this statement? What are your feelings about the order that existed?

19. How do the sisters make private acts of rebellion against the society of their childhood? Are these conscious acts, or reflections of the changing times they live in? Why do you think they all end up at Rothafane again?
20. What is the effect of telling the stories with the added layer of hindsight after a long passage of time? How accurate do you think the details of the stories are, and does that matter to you? Can you think of examples of how the women grapple with the effort to remember, or even wonder whether they have the details right? What about clear images that bring back a whole scene?
21. Discuss the role of love and sexuality throughout the novel. Consider the importance of the theme of fertility from the constant references to the rainy season, to Hawa's tubal ligation. Asana describes her sexual initiation (removal of clitoris) as a special time in the company of women—are you able to support or understand her viewpoint?
22. Conclude your discussion of the novel by considering Asana's statement "I let it be known that I would consider relinquishing the birthright of womanhood in exchange for the liberty of a man" (p. 248). What does she mean by this, and how does it resonate throughout the novel? Look back at the question that started your discussion, perhaps, to fully understand the rich complexity of the birthright of women. Do you think that Asana's was a good decision to make?

Suggestions for further reading:

The Red Tent by Anita Diamant
Falling Leaves by Adeline Mah
Beasts of No Nation by Uzodinma Iweala
The Poisonwood Bible by Barbara Kingsolver
The Darling by Russell Banks
Season of Migration to the North by Tayeb Salih
Admiring Silence by Abdulrazak Gurnah
In the Eye of the Sun by Ahdaf Soueif