



Reading group guide to ENLIGHTENMENT FOR IDIOTS

by Anne Cushman

Amanda is an almost-thirty would-be yoga teacher who pines for spiritual awakening—almost as much as she pines for unavailable men. Eking out a living writing “For Idiots” travel guides, she jumps at the chance to leave her boyfriend troubles behind and travel to India to write a guidebook about finding enlightenment. The ensuing pilgrimage is both touching and laugh-out-loud funny, as Amanda learns that yoga can’t protect its practitioners from their own human failings. Her illusions about spiritual practice are shredded as she meets a string of eccentric teachers in the chaos of India. And when Amanda discovers two months into her journey that she’s pregnant, she’s forced to grapple with impossible options. She realizes that no matter how far she travels, she can’t get away from the pain, passion, comedy, and chaos of her own life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the Prologue, Amanda says that her memory of her father leaving is “the pose that’s buried within all the poses that came after.” What does she mean by that?
2. Amanda says of her relationship with Matt, “Its very unsatisfactoriness—the sense of always being a little hungry—was what marked it as love.” And she repeatedly turns down the chance to be with Tom, the reliable partner who offers her warmth and security. Is romantic love necessarily part yearning? How does this view of love compare with the view offered by Anjali, the Indian woman Amanda meets on the train to Haridwar? Which view do you most relate to, and why? How does Amanda’s own understanding of love change over the course of her journey?
3. What is the purpose of the yoga pose instructions that punctuate every few chapters of *Enlightenment for Idiots*? How do they relate to the themes—and plot points—of the chapters that surround them? Who do you think is giving these instructions—Amanda? Her “inner teacher”? An invisible yoga master? When you read the story, were you tempted to actually do the poses? Why or why not?
4. Every chapter of *Enlightenment for Idiots* begins with a quote from a famous spiritual master. How do these quotes support—or counterbalance—the story? Did any particular quotes stand out for you? Why?
5. In Rishikesh, Amanda meets Devi Das, a barefoot *sadhu* from Kansas who refers to himself as “we.” He becomes her mentor, guide, and traveling companion. Is Devi Das an authentic spiritual seeker? Is he wise or delusional? Did you expect him to become Amanda’s boyfriend? Were you relieved or disappointed that he didn’t?
6. After discovering that she is pregnant, Amanda chooses to continue her journey through India, despite the obvious risks. Why does she

make this choice? Do you think she made the right decision? Why or why not?

7. Looking for awakening, Amanda meets a whole string of spiritual teachers and samples everything from a silent meditation retreat to a tantra party. Are these teachers and practices authentic? Or fraudulent? On the train to Varanasi, Devi Das tells her, “Even if the teacher is a fraud, the teachings can still be real.” Do you agree or disagree? Who was your favorite of Amanda’s teachers? Who was your least favorite? As Amanda is giving birth, all the spiritual teachers appear to her, giving advice and encouragement. What has she learned—or not learned—from each of them?

8. When Matt learns that Amanda is pregnant, he bolts. Afterward, sobbing in the ancient meditation cave of the Buddha—who also left the mother of his child—Amanda wonders if the Buddha was “just another guy who was afraid to commit.” Do you think that spiritual renunciation is a form of running away from life? Why or why not?

9. In the instructions to Reclining Bound Angle Pose, the mysterious yoga teacher says, “Go into the temple of your own pelvis and bow down before [the Mother Goddess’s] altar. But don’t be surprised if what appears is your own mother instead.” Discuss Amanda’s relationship with her mother. How does it affect the choices she makes in her life? Does it change over the course of the novel?

10. By the end of the book, Amanda has formed a new—though unconventional—family. She writes, “It’s not the family I imagined. But it’s real, and that counts for a lot. Because up close, nothing looks like it does when you’re imagining it from a distance.” Do you agree with her? Do you have a “family” that’s as close—or more—to you than your biological one?

11. How has Amanda’s understanding of enlightenment changed by the end of the novel? How has yours?

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