



House of Sand and Fog

by Andre Dubus III

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Discussion Questions

1. Do you sympathize more with Kathy Nicolo or with Colonel Behrani in part one of the novel? How does Dubus's use of alternating first-person narratives affect your response to, and involvement with, the characters?
2. The contested ownership of the house on Bisgrove Street is the fulcrum of the novel's plot, Who, in your opinion, owns the house once Behrani has paid cash for it? What would be a fair solution to the conflict?
3. Early in the novel Behrani buys himself a hat, which he says gives him "the appearance of a man with a sense of humor about living, a man who is capable to live life for the living of it" [p.28]. Why is this a poignant thing for Behrani to wish for himself? Does he in fact take life too seriously?
4. What does Kathy's response to Nick's desertion reveal about her character? Why does Lester fall in love with Kathy? Is he better for her than Nick was?
5. Lester tells Kathy that he had wanted to become a teacher, but plans changed when Carol became pregnant. Is Lester's job in law enforcement a poor fit for him? Why did he once plant evidence in a domestic violence case?
6. Who, of the three main characters, is most complex? Who is most straightforward?
7. Where does the hostility between Lester and Behrani spring from? How do their memories—Lester's of his teenage girlfriend and her brother, Behrani's of his murdered cousin, Jasmineen—function to reveal the deep emotions that motivate action in this novel?
8. At what point do Kathy's and Lester's actions depart from the path of a simple desire for justice and move into something else? Why can neither of them seem to act rationally? Does Behrani act rationally?
9. Does Lester drink to break free of a sense of deadness, or to anesthetize himself? Why does he risk his family life as well as his professional life for his involvement with Kathy? Is he attempting to reinvigorate his life, or is he unconsciously seeking to destroy himself?
10. Note the epigraph to the novel, from *The Balcony* by Octavio Paz: "Beyond myself/somewhere/I wait for my arrival." How does it apply to the problems of self and alienation in each of the three main characters? Who has the clearest sense of his or her identity? What does it mean to have a clear sense of self?
11. Describing the success of her recovery program, Kathy says, "I had already stopped wanting what I'd been craving off and on since I was fifteen, for Death to come take me the way the wind does a dried leaf out on its limb" [p. 46]. How does the novel affect your response to the social and psychological issues of addiction, depression, and suicide? Do you find yourself being understanding or judgmental of Kathy as the stress of the conflict increases? Is she actually more of a survivor than she thinks she is?
12. As Behrani's wife, Nadereh, an admirable character? Does her feminine role in a very traditional marriage reduce her importance as an actor in this drama? Does she have qualities that are missing in Behrani, Kathy, and Lester?
13. Behrani tells his son, "Remember what I've told you of so many Americans: they are not disciplined and have not the courage to take responsibility for their actions. If these people paid us the fair price we are asking, we could leave and she could return. It is that simple. But they are like little children, son. They want things only their way" [p.172]. How accurate is his perception of Americans? How well does it apply to Kathy and Lester?



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continued

14. How does *House of Sand and Fog* highlight the conflict between downwardly mobile Americans and upwardly mobile recent immigrants? What role does racism play in the reaction of Americans and foreigners to each other?
15. Why has Kathy avoided telling her mother and brother the truth about her situation? Does their meeting at the end of the novel resolve any of Kathy's difficult feelings about her place in her family?
16. Should Behrani be held responsible, on some level, for the crimes and excesses of the Shah's regime? Is he responsible for Esmail's fate?
17. Why does Behrani put on his military uniform at the climax of the novel?
18. What do you find most disturbing about the novel's denouement? As you find yourself imagining an alternate ending, what would that ending be?