

The Orphan Keeper

Study Guide

The following questions are intended to stimulate personal thought and group discussion. If you are using them for a book group, we suggest that rather than trying to cover every question, you select a few that feel pertinent to your group.

1. The book's dedication reads: *To the lost child in all of us, searching for home*. Can you relate to the plight of little lost Chellamuthu? In what ways are you also an orphan? In what ways are you an *orphan keeper*? Who in the story could be called an orphan keeper? Why?
2. Eli poses the question, "If a child is kidnapped from hell and carried to heaven, should we condemn the kidnapper?" How would you answer? Was Eli *saving* children by taking them out of poverty and abuse to give them a chance at a better life, or was he *condemning* them? Is there any justification for his actions?
3. It's not unusual in India for kidnapped children to be intentionally maimed and then forced to beg on the streets in order to collect money for those *caring* for them. It has been argued that giving to these children encourages the practice. If you walked past such a child, would you give or refrain? Why?
4. When Taj returned to India as an adult, he remembered the orphanage as being three to four hours away from his home. If you were a kidnapped child of seven, would you have been able to gauge the distance so accurately? Why would Taj (Chellamuthu) have perhaps been more mature than the average seven-year-old American?
5. The Lincoln Home for Homeless Children was established to help poor Indian orphans find new homes. Did it lose its purpose over time? Is greed always destined to push noble aspirations aside? How can the slide to greed be prevented?
6. Linda quotes *The Phoenician Women*, by Euripides: "This is slavery, not to speak one's thought." How was Chellamuthu enslaved? How do we enslave ourselves in a similar manner?
7. It was an amazing *coincidence* that Priya, when first dating Taj, discovered a letter written years earlier by her own father to Fred and Linda Rowland. Later, Taj *coincidentally* met Vakesh, a child with whom he had played at the orphanage. Later still, as Taj drove past his unrecognizable childhood home, he would hear the hacking of coconuts, causing him to stop, listen, and remember. Do you believe in coincidence? Are our lives guided strictly by chance, or is there something more that might explain these situations?
8. Linda dreamed that Taj would marry an Indian girl, which he eventually did. How important are dreams in our lives? Can they predict the future? If yes, how is that possible?
9. When Taj saw Priya's picture, it was love at first sight, with his instant declaration that he was going to marry her. Do you believe in love at first sight? Is it rational? Why? Why not?

10. Many Indian parents still arrange the marriages of their children. What might be the benefits of arranged marriage? What might be the drawbacks?
11. Taj eventually discovered that he was actually from a higher caste than Priya and her family. What do you know about the caste system in India? Why do you suppose it has endured for so many years? How would you respond if you were taught that you could never rise above the duties of your caste? Although we don't follow a caste system in the United States, do socioeconomic conditions often limit our potential? What other conditions might also be limiting?
12. When Taj was desperate for help to search for his family, he begged Christopher Raj, a man he'd just met in person the day before, to take time off work, leave his family, and return to Coimbatore to assist. Christopher, with barely a hesitation, jumped on the train for another ten-hour trip to help Taj. Would you have made a similar decision for a virtual stranger? It turned out to be a choice that dramatically changed the course of Christopher's life (and that of Taj). What lessons can be learned from Christopher's actions? How careful should we be with our own *everyday* decisions and how we interact with others?
13. In the story, Arayi visits with three astrologers. The last one tells her that her son will return, and when he does, *he will fly*. Although the timing of this visit to this astrologer was presented in the book as having occurred shortly after Chellamuthu was taken (for the sake of pacing and plot), in real life, it occurred years later, about eight months before Taj actually returned. Do you believe there is any validity to astrology? If not, how does one explain the accuracy of the astrologer's prediction?
14. What in the story points to the possibility that Chellamuthu's father sold him to the orphanage? What points to the probability that his father was not involved? Does it matter? Why? Why not?
15. Taj cherishes his wife and daughters, family he would not have if he had remained in India. That said, he still feels conflicted over having been ripped from his family in India as a child. Should Taj be grateful he was kidnapped, or should he be angry?
16. In the final pages of the book, Priya talks with Taj about his father's possible involvement in his kidnapping, as well as Taj's ongoing angst. When Taj confides that sharing his story has helped, she notes that stories are redemptive. Is she right? What parallels can be drawn between the telling of stories and redemption?