

Guided Reading and Discussion Questions for *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*

- 1) In discussing writing about queerness in this novel, Vuong said, “There is a call, rightfully, for literature to make more room for queer joy, or perhaps even more radically, queer okayness. But I did not want to answer that call by creating a false utopia—because safety is still rare and foreign to the experiences of the queer folks I love, who are also often poor and underserved. ... The novel insists that there is power, and with it, agency, in survival ... because trauma is still an integral reality for queer folks. But these bodies do know joy, and they know it by acknowledging and honoring the tribulations they outlived. We often think of survival as something that merely happens to us, that we are perhaps lucky to have. But I like to think of survival as a result of active self-knowledge, and even more so, a creative force.”
 - 1) How do you see survival portrayed as a creative force in this novel? Do you agree with Vuong’s take on survival here? Why or why not?
 - 2) Do you think that *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* does portray “queer okayness”? Why or why not?
- 2) In discussing the slipperiness of the details in Lan’s story’s and her pleas for Little Dog to make her young again, Little Dog says, “Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect. We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed. ... Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone” (27-28).
 - How do you see Little Dog’s words here applying to your own life? If you don’t think they apply at all, explain why not.
- 3) When Little Dog tells his mother that he’s gay and she in turn tells him about the abortion of his older brother, he remarks, “We were exchanging truths, I realized, which is to say, we were cutting one another” (133).
 - Did this statement resonate with you at all? Why or why not?
 - Do you think it is possible to exchange truths without cutting one another? Why or why not?
- 4) In this novel, to look and find something beautiful can be both a loving and a violent act. For the former, “To gaze at what pleases ... is, in itself, replication—the image prolonged in the eye, making more of it, making it last” (138). For the latter, “To be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted” (238).
 - How did you personally connect to the discussions of looking—both loving and violent—throughout the book?
 - Did they bring up any memories or associations?
- 5) What do you think the value is in writing a letter to someone who won’t or can’t read it?
- 6) What were some of your favorite lines or metaphors in this book?
- 7) At one point, Little Dog says, “Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence — but rather, that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it.” Do you agree with this perspective?