

Jaya Nepal! Discussion Questions

1. When Benjamin arrives in Nepal, he finds himself feeling alone, even though he's surrounded by a city teeming with people. In what ways does he attempt to steel himself and make the most of his situation? Discuss the importance of adaptability as it pertains to traveling abroad. What remedies do you find effective for curing homesickness?
2. The Pepsicola Townplanning pipal tree is the gathering point for community members young and old, rich and poor; it's the spiritual and social hub of activity from which all local, national, and international news is disseminated throughout the community. What venues exist in the Western world that are analogous to the pipal tree?
3. Benjamin meets many interesting characters during his time in Nepal and India. Of all the people he meets, one of most unlikely people he befriends is Raju Shrestha, proprietor of Slice of Life Bakery—a dark and dingy cakeshop and hookah lounge located in Old Kathmandu. Why is Benjamin so eager to understand the seemingly incongruous aspects of Raju's character? What characteristics does Raju possess that others find so intriguing? In what ways are Raju and Dr. Singh similar? In what ways do they differ?
4. Food, family, and festivity are the mainstays of Nepali culture. These things also factor prominently in the lives of many Americans and other Westerners. How do the expression and celebration of these values differ between the two groups?
5. On several occasions throughout the novel, Benjamin heads into the wilds of Nepal to recreate with friends and take a break from his Peace Corps duties. While in the mountains, Benjamin is frequently in awe of the natural beauty around him and is struck by the genuine kindness and hardiness of the people he meets. To what extent does the geography of a region shape its inhabitants and leave a lasting impression on all those who visit? And what leaves more of an indelible mark on Benjamin: the people he meets during his journey or the places he visits?
6. How does the arc of Benjamin's life change after his initial experience in the Dharavi slums? What realizations does his time in the slums stir in him? And why is this such a monumental experience—a turning point, really—in Benjamin's life? To whom does he owe a debt of thanks?
7. At one point in the novel, Benjamin states that his singularity of focus is simultaneously one of his greatest strengths and one of his greatest weaknesses. What does he mean by this? Do you think Benjamin's decision to "ET" is courageous and noble, or selfish and foolhardy? To what extent is this decision driven by the desire to right the wrongs of his past? To what extent is it driven by his desire for personal freedom?
8. We learn throughout the novel that Benjamin holds the men and women of Nepal in high esteem, especially those who engage in manual trades such as rickshaw pedaling,

portering, and farming. What is it about these vocations that Benjamin finds so virtuous? Is his vision of the Nepali work life realistic, romanticized, both, or neither?

9. Throughout the novel, Benjamin witnesses the clash of aesthetics present in Nepal; that is, he sees the bucolic nature of the countryside existing next to the chaos and commotion of the urban fray. Compare and contrast rural and urban living in Nepal and India, and discuss why Benjamin finds beauty in both.
10. Following a visit to India in 1938, Carl Jung expressed the following opinion: "It is quite possible that India is the real world, and that the [Westerner] lives in a madhouse of abstractions...Life in India has not yet withdrawn into the capsule of the head. It is still the whole body that lives. No wonder the [Westerner] feels dreamlike; the complete life of India is something of which he merely dreams. When you walk with naked feet, how can you ever forget the earth?" First, do you think that Jung's remarks about India (and the rest of the subcontinent, including Nepal) are still relevant? And, second, given the events detailed in this novel, do you see any parallels between Jung's remarks and Benjamin's own thoughts and experiences in South Asia?