

Book Group Questions for *Body and Bread*

1. Sarah says that her university colleagues close their office doors when she walks past, her brothers haven't spoken to her in years, and she lives by herself in a sparsely furnished house. She has no friends, and she hasn't been involved in a romantic relationship for quite a while. She dislikes freshmen and is rude when Terezie first comes to ask for help. Do these facts make Sarah an unsympathetic character?
2. At end of the first chapter, Sarah raises her hand to block out everyone in her family except Sam. Why does she do that, and why does she feel close to this brother?
3. When Sam guts the fish, his actions seem grotesque, even cruel. He says that sometimes you have to do ugly things. What does he mean, and what does this imply about him?
4. Sarah's mother, Norine, seems strong willed and independent in chapter one when she throws the horse's reins at the grandfather. But when she tells the story about Otis dying, she seems racist and wants Sarah to submit to gender expectations. How do you explain this change?
5. When Sarah recalls Otis telling his Master Sam stories, she says she hopes he didn't skew them according to what she wanted to hear. Later, when she sits in the USO with her girlfriends and the two soldiers, she admits she's confused about how to act with Tyrone, who is black. Is Sarah racist?
6. References to a steam engine and a fish act as motifs throughout the novel. What do these images symbolize?
7. Why is Sarah having hallucinations? What triggers them, and why do they always include a *Mexicha* god? How do they operate as a structuring device in the novel?
8. Sarah's research focuses on rituals that include an *iziptla*. What is an *iziptla*, and how does it relate to Sarah and Sam?
9. What does Sarah's life-long interest in the Mesoamerican culture, various theologies, and metaphysics reveal about her? Is it an admirable pursuit or an obsession?
10. Sarah's father is a moralist, biblical scholar, traditionalist, and dedicated physician. How could someone with his convictions become romantically involved with Ruby? How would you describe his feelings about Sam?
11. When Sarah's father leaned over the midden at the farm and said that if Sam hadn't reported his findings, he'd stolen from his heritage, how was that literally true?
12. Describe cultural differences between the Peltons and the Cervenkas. Why is this significant to the story?
13. Settings such as the farm creek, the Cervenkas' house, the cotton field, the hospital anatomy lab, the coastal house, and the water therapy pool are vividly described. Why is so much attention given to the settings? How do they function as more than simple backdrops?
14. Some of the scenes between Sarah and Cornelia incorporate humor. Can you find any other places that are humorous?
15. What is the source of Sam's ambiguity, rebelliousness, and unpredictability? Is his behavior an emotional reaction to his parentage, could he be suffering from a mood disorder, or do you detect something else?
16. When Sam's taxi drove off the ramp, was that an accident or did he do it on purpose?

17. Why does Sarah press against Sam in the pool during water therapy? Is she sexually aroused, or are her actions a manifestation of her longing for an emotional connection? Would you describe her actions as immoral?
18. Grief and guilt are always effects of a family member's suicide. Do Sarah's parents and brothers each seem to feel responsible for Sam's death? If so, how do you know?
19. What does Terezie's lack of health insurance suggest about our country's rising costs of medical care?
20. Do you agree with Kurt and Hugh that since Terezie has started a new family and the Peltons haven't seen her in thirty years, she does not have a claim on the grandparents' coastal house?
21. Do you agree with Kurt that he has a moral obligation to be a steward of his inheritance, even if his commitment jeopardizes Cornelia's health?
22. What does Sarah's story suggest about family relationships, a balanced mind/body connection, and the effects of suicide?