Discussion Questions: The Arsonists’ City
Created by Reading Group Choices

1. Consider the author’s technique of opening the book with a death, and then having it return much later in the story. How does it illustrate the tenacity of the past, and its long-felt repercussions?

2. Compare the conversations of Ava in her Brooklyn social circle near the opening of the book to the conversations with, for example, Naj at the gallery opening in Beirut, or Tarek and Mazna during her theater rehearsals in Damascus. What differences and similarities exist between the interactions in terms of subject and how individuals express themselves?

3. Consider the various reasons why members of the Nasr family choose to live where they do. How does this relate more broadly to reasons why people are forced to leave their countries, or why they remain?

4. Both Mazna and Mimi fear the failure of their artistic hopes. What circumstances lead each to not realize their dreams? Discuss examples from your own creative, educational, or professional pursuits that did not work out.

5. Life in Beirut continues in the midst of war and cultural strife, both in the historic chapters following Mazna’s life and in the contemporary ones featuring Naj and the entire family. How does an idea of war-affected areas being all dangerous or all safe—wholly one or the other—become complicated by these daily routines continuing in the midst of conflict?

6. Consider Kit’s comment that “All brown women look alike” (336). How is this generalization reinforced not only by the community of Blythe and others similar to it, but by the US film industry?

7. What do the trials of Ava and Nate, Harper and Mimi, Naj and Fee, and Idris and Mazna teach us about navigating relationships, and the dishonesty, forgiveness, and compromise that they often involve? What keeps the core relationship between Idris and Mazna going for decades, despite its difficulties?

8. Harper says at one point, in response to the children’s investigation of their parents’ past: “I think people deserve to have their secrets” (387). Do you agree with Harper? When is it right to respect another’s secrets, and when is it right to try to uncover them?

9. Idris and Mazna both decide not to share important information with the other at crucial moments: Idris lies to the film director, and Mazna stays silent about Ava. Do you agree with their decisions? Are both examples of what Harper calls “unburdening” a partner, by at times choosing to say nothing?

10. In what ways does the city of Beirut mirror the family, in terms of the turmoil, the inseparable mix of cultures, and the struggle between past and future?