



Questions for Discussion

1. The first chapter of HOME LEAVE is told from an unusual point of view. Why might the author have chosen to begin her story with the house itself? How did that decision set the tone for the rest of the book? What kind of connection do you have with your physical home? If your house could speak, what stories might it tell?
2. How would you compare Sophie and Leah? How do they compare themselves? Do they strike you as having a typical sibling relationship?
3. When we first meet Elise, she is struggling with feelings of shame, but by the end of the novel she has reclaimed her sexuality. Did you think Elise and Chris's marriage would endure all that it did? Would you have expected the woman who once played in a Christian rock band and worried that marrying Chris "would mean a life of debauchery and drunkenness and scant-to-no clothing" to have so dramatically altered her relationship with shame?
4. How do the Kriegsteins understand chance? Fate? How would you answer this question, posed in "The Good Years" chapter: "If they had stayed in the States, would *it* have happened? Was Sophie's death a foregone conclusion in any geography, a heart failure built into her system that would have struck her down on any continent?"?
5. The author writes from many points of view. Which perspective did you most identify with? Have you ever imagined what stories a long-ago relative or someone recently deceased might tell about your own family?
6. In what ways is Elise a nontraditional mother figure? In what ways does she conform to traditional maternal roles? Do you find yourself identifying with her? When?
7. Each Kriegstein seems to change with every city the family lives in. Can you imagine your own life in a far-flung locale? How might your life look different? What might stay the same?
8. What does home mean to you? Is it where you grew up? Where you currently reside?
9. HOME LEAVE is full of turning points—both expected ones, like planned moves, and unexpected ones, like the first time someone touches Sophie's hair in Shanghai. Which ones resonated with you the most? What are some turning points you remember from your own life? Were they planned or surprising?

10. Would you have gone along with Sophie's plan to run away from Shanghai? Have you ever felt persuaded by a family member to do something you knew was risky, the way Leah was seemingly persuaded by Sophie?

11. Sophie, during a family therapy session, tells Leah, "Trust your own deaths." What do you think she means? What does that mean to you?

A Conversation with Brittani Sonnenberg

Q: HOME LEAVE is a work of fiction, but you have also lived all over the world, and sadly lost your own sister at a young age. Why did you decide to use those elements of your personal story in a fictional setting, rather than in a memoir?

A: While I initially experimented with writing a memoir and exploring some of the autobiographical material in HOME LEAVE through nonfiction, I was unsatisfied with the results. As I wrote, I didn't feel that urgent curiosity that is crucial for good writing. Instead, I felt as though I were merely reporting events. I put the memoir aside and turned my attention to short fiction. But I still found myself strongly drawn to the basic setup—an American expatriate family abroad, two sisters, a tragedy—and I decided to start from scratch. This time, I allowed myself the freedom of fiction: I drew on real-life events while creating wildly different scenarios, inventing characters, rewriting outcomes, etc. You might think, given the pain of losing my younger sister, Blair, I would have wanted to make that story end differently for the Kriegsteins and keep Sophie alive. But I wanted to look closely at how a family that lacks a geographical home (and considers the family unit itself “home”) deals with loss when one of its members suddenly dies.

Once I began working on the material as a novel, I started having a lot more fun. One of the chapters I most enjoyed writing was “The People’s Square,” in which Sophie and Leah attempt to run away from home (or “run back home,” as Sophie puts it). Although my sister and I complained a lot about Shanghai to each other, we never put our grievances into action. It was exhilarating to push the emotional truth of that era—our longing for Atlanta and the familiar—into a new “truth,” an imaginary series of events. If plot is simply the result of choices that characters make and the consequences that follow, it holds true that by introducing new choices, and thus new consequences, a new story emerges, and with it, a new family.

Q: You live in Berlin, Germany, but you're a US citizen and your extended family resides in the United States. Where is home for you? Has that answer changed for you over the years?

A: I suppose I would say that I have several homes. I'm going on my sixth year in Berlin, which is the longest I've lived anywhere (my family lived in Atlanta for five years), and I enjoy the sense of belonging that comes with staying put, even if I still feel foreign on a daily basis. Then again,

feeling foreign also feels “homelike” to me! I tend to say I am from Atlanta when people ask, just because it’s the easiest answer, but if my interlocutor has a patient air I might add that my family moved to Asia when I was twelve. Or, if I’m feeling provocative, I may simply answer that I don’t have a home.

Aside from Atlanta and Berlin, I also feel a deep connection to Shanghai and Singapore. Our time in those two cities profoundly challenged and changed me, and I think any place where you experience significant growth also becomes a home. It resides in you, even when you have ceased residing in it. Like the Kriegsteins, my family also traveled to the US in the summer when we lived overseas, and we spent a great deal of time at my grandmother’s mountain house in North Georgia. So the word “home” also strongly evokes memories from that region: piney mountain air, blackberry cobbler, the gentle peaks of the Smoky Mountains, roadside vegetable stands, hot, briny boiled peanuts, and the teasing banter of my cousins and Southern relatives.

Q: The Kriegstein family moves from Europe to Asia, with stints in the United States in between. But also explored in the novel is the dramatic shift Chris undergoes as he moves from a rural world to an urban one. Why did this migratory story also interest you?

A: I think Americans possess a strong capacity for reinvention. But reinvention is often spurred by both profound confidence—I can be someone else, somewhere else—and profound insecurity—I don’t belong here; I crave transformation. What interested me most in Chris’s character is how the values he learns on the farm and on the basketball court as a kid (work hard, don’t complain, stay humble) remain vital for him as his career accelerates and he becomes a successful, jet-setting CEO. Chris is able to manage his daunting travel schedule and work demands precisely because of this steadiness. He is eager to leave the farm but he never rejects its ethos, whereas Elise winds up shedding many of the Southern Baptist beliefs she grew up with in Mississippi.

Q: You have lectured and written on the subject of Third Culture Kids. Can you explain what a Third Culture Kid is?

A: I think that David C. Pollock and Ruth Van Reken, two sociologists who have written extensively on the subject, have come up with a good definition. According to them, “A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar

background.” (Pollock and Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009.)

This definition helps explain why living overseas impacts children much differently than their parents. For Elise and Chris, “home,” for the first eighteen years of their lives, was inarguably Chariton and Vidalia, respectively. For Sophie and Leah, “home” is a flexible construct. To some degree, the same is true of the girls’ trans-national identities, even if they carry US passports. After eighteen years of living across three continents, Leah doesn’t feel fully American, a fact made painfully obvious when she goes to college and finds herself surrounded by “real” Americans. Often, TCKs struggle with feelings of inauthenticity, of not having “full ownership in any one culture,” as Van Reken and Pollock put it. I, too, spent my college years grappling with what the novelist and TCK Joseph O’Neill has called “personal placelessness.” Over time, however, I have discovered just how widespread this phenomenon of displacement is, and have deeply benefited from the community of others who are similarly bereft, and/or similarly searching. Due to globalism’s advance, those who have a secure notion of home are increasingly in the minority, and the rest of us—TCKs, CCKs (cross-culture kids, for example second-generation Chinese Americans), immigrants, exiles, nomads—understand that we may never truly feel “at home” in any one place.

Q: One theme of the novel is loss—and how a family moves on, or doesn’t, following a tragic death. And grief and mourning is expressed differently around the world. In your travels, have you found that people from other cultures deal with death in a healthier manner than Americans generally do? Or vice versa? Or is grief simply grief, no matter the place?

A: I do think that, to a certain extent, “grief is simply grief” everywhere. When we listen to music, even if we don’t understand the lyrics, we can usually guess whether the song is about budding love or searing heartbreak, because it speaks to shared human emotions. That said, I think grief is closer to the surface in some cultures than in others, where it is neatly tucked away. In Cambodia, for example, where I lived for six months in 2001, the grief from the deaths of millions of Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge regime was still palpable. When I told people there I had lost a sister, I often received weary, understanding nods—they had lost sisters and brothers themselves, though in much more horrific circumstances. In the US, despite the numerous shelves dedicated to grief and mourning in bookstores, death feels like a much more awkward subject to broach. I’m not sure whether some cultures’ methods of dealing with death are healthier than others; I think each culture’s various methods represent a long evolution of what

Lionel Trilling called “manners and morals,” and evince, more than anything, our stumbling bewilderment in the face of death and the loss of those we love. For years, I shunned therapy, perhaps because it seemed too “Western” to me; I’ve since found it to be tremendously life-giving.

Q: How does your reading life influence your writing life? Did any books or writers in particular influence you as you wrote HOME LEAVE?

A: My reading life strongly influences my writing life. Often, the feeling I have when reading brilliant books is of receiving courage for my own writing. When I was in college, I struggled, as I mentioned above, with the sense of not belonging to any one culture. I was just beginning to write fiction, and this insecurity manifested itself in the fear that I would not be able to set a story anywhere convincingly, because I did not know any one place well enough. But reading Joseph Conrad and V. S. Naipaul, who each had their own struggles with displacement and “belatedness,” as Naipaul puts it, helped me envision a way in which I might draw on all of my homes, rather than dismiss them as long layovers.

Ha Jin and Eudora Welty have also been strongly inspiring authors for me: I admire how they both manage to evoke foreign settings (China and the American South, respectively) for audiences largely unfamiliar with those regions. They succeed in doing so, I believe, for the same reasons: richly drawn characters and a great sense of humor. “After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town” by Ha Jin and “Why I live at the P.O.” by Eudora Welty are two of my favorite stories, and ones I go back to again and again. Finally, as I was drafting HOME LEAVE and experimenting with which novelistic form best suited my material, I also drew inspiration from authors such as David Mitchell and Jennifer Egan, whose formally adventurous fiction urged me to take my own risks.