

## Discussion Questions:

### ○ Theme - Poetry & Storytelling

1. “An American Sunrise” contains several pages of informative prose on the history of Native cultures and their oppression in the United States. How does the telling of this history in a more straightforward way than poetry complement the poems surrounding the prose? How has reading Harjo’s story affected your understanding of American history?
2. The concept of generations, and what is passed on and repeated throughout them, comes up frequently in the book. What do you think Harjo is trying to say about what we inherit and what connects us?
3. Harjo includes Emily Dickinson’s famous poem “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” in her collection and then adds at the bottom of that page, “Emily Dickinson was six years old when Monahwee and his family began the emigration to the West” (p. 60). What do you think Harjo is getting at by including the poem, and the historical marker after it?
4. How do Harjo’s varied forms add to the book’s energy and impact?
5. Joy Harjo writes about her journey as she embarks on a return to her ancestral homeland. Does Harjo find her way home, metaphorically, by the end of the book?

### ○ Theme - Resilience & Identity

6. How does the notion of the difficulty yet importance of being ourselves play out throughout each of the poems in the book?

7. As an outsider getting an inside look at Harjo's personal and internal struggles throughout the book, what theme resonates most with your own life experiences?
8. Why do you think Harjo chose this as the title of her collection? How does the title relate to some of her other poem titles? And what does the cover art hint at for the collection?
9. Compared to *An American Sunrise*, what other creative work has had a similar importance to or impact on you?
10. As a reader, did you find yourself surprised by what you felt and discovered while moving through the work?

## **Exercises:**

- Write down your expectations of what the book will be about before reading. Examine the cover page, the dedication, etc. After reading, compare your expectations to the actual poems.
- Choose someone or something that you want to honor in poetry; think about the process, the specific roles they play in your life, and any important events associated. Looking at the form, write your own poem after Harjo using a similar structure of rhetorical questions followed by remembering and honoring.
- Pick a poem from the collection that alludes to a famous writing or song that you are familiar with. Compare and contrast what you already know about the work with Harjo's interpretation within her poem and see how your understanding of its history has changed.

## **Sources:**

<https://wnorton.com/books/9780393358483/about-the-book/reading-guide>

<https://teachlivingpoets.com/2020/11/19/new-joy-harjo-full-unit-for-an-american-sunrise/>