



Go Big Read

UW–Madison Common Book Program

Suggested Discussion Questions for *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai

1. Malala's relationship with her parents, particularly her father, is arguably one of the most important factors in Malala's story. Malala writes, "It was my grandmother's faith in my father that gave him the courage to find his own proud path he could travel along. This is the path that he would later show me" (36). What are some of her father's courageous acts that appear to inspire Malala most, and lead her on her own "path"? How does Malala's courage mirror that of her father's? How does Malala's relationship with her mother compare with her relationship with her father? What does she see as her mother's virtues?
2. Malala's passion and activism for women's rights and education may lead the reader to forget that she is only 16 years old when writing her story. Are there moments in or recollections of her school and home life when you feel that the "teenager" in Malala becomes apparent? For example, Malala often describes her friendships and rivalries ("I fought nonstop with my brother Khushal, and he would go crying to our mother. Never in history have Khushal and Malala been friends" 144-5), and she mentions her interest in the *Twilight* movies and other staples of Western popular culture. Do any of these statements surprise you? If so, which ones, and why? How did they influence your perception of Malala and her story?
3. In the first chapter, Malala describes herself as someone who belongs to many communities and assumes different identities: Pashtun, Muslim, female, Swat Valley resident, student. How does membership in each community influence the different parts of her life? Is there one identity that is the strongest force in her life? Or does it depend on the situation? How do you identify yourself? How does it influence your thinking or actions?

4. Throughout the book, Malala provides a window into Pashtun culture by providing examples of Pashtun traditions. For instance, when relatives arrive for a visit, the hosts do not know—or ask—when they are leaving. In school, girls read speeches written by their fathers, uncles or teachers and are judged and awarded prizes. Pashtuns also rarely say “Thank you.” Were there other cultural traditions that struck you as unique or notable? What cultural traditions do we have in America (or Wisconsin) that might surprise Malala?

5. Malala wrote the book for a Western audience, thereby providing background or explanation for some customs that are well known to those within her culture (for example, the way visitors are treated.) By writing this very personal story—and sharing details that place the reader inside her everyday life—does Malala increase your concern about the fate of women in South Asia and the Middle East? About girls worldwide getting an education? About how the Taliban has infiltrated Malala’s Swat Valley? How does reading this book compare to reading news stories in the New York Times or watching CNN?

6. *I Am Malala* is written with Christina Lamb, an award-winning British journalist who has written several books about the history and politics of Pakistan and other war-torn countries. When a biographical account is written with another author, does it affect your reading of the book? Why? What are some circumstances in which having a second author is necessary or appropriate? How might the book be different had Malala written it by herself?

7. Malala’s address to the United Nations Youth Assembly includes the following quotation: “Let us pick up our books and our pens. They are the most powerful weapons” (Yousafzai). How does this statement speak to Malala’s personal experience and her call for activism on a global level? Is there a specific cause that you care about deeply? Have you been involved with, or have you led a project or event to further that cause? If so, how?

8. Malala argues that an education for women should be a basic right. She writes, “Education is education. We should learn everything and then choose which path to follow. Education is neither Eastern nor Western, it is human” (162). Do you agree that education is a basic right? What does Malala mean by “education?” What is “education” for the Taliban? What happens when a group of people is denied an education?

9. Many women Malala mentions in the book are targeted, killed or wounded as a result of speaking out. For example, Malala is named after Malalai of Maiwand, a folk hero who was killed by fire but inspired Afghan troops to victory. And Malala describes Benazir Bhutto as a role model who inspired young women to speak out (129). How do the lives of these women parallel each other? How are they different? Do the fates of Malalai of Maiwand and Benazir Bhutto foreshadow Malala's fate?

10. Islam is a world religion that claims some 1.3 billion adherents. The Five Pillars of Islam are as follows: profession of faith; prayer five times a day; giving to the poor; fasting during the month of Ramadan; and a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Although all Muslims adhere to basic tenets of the faith, they—like Christians, Jews and religious groups everywhere—disagree among themselves. What are some examples from the book of ways in which Muslims from different groups might approach an issue, value or concern differently? Were you surprised about the range of behaviors and views that Muslims hold?

11. Malala says that “both the army and the Taliban were powerful. Sometimes their roadblocks were less than a kilometer apart on the same main roads. They would stop us but be unaware of each other's presence. It was unbelievable. No one understood why we were not being defended. People would say they were two sides of the same coin” (152). Malala also states that their own deputy commissioner was not only attending Taliban meetings, but leading them as well (151). Was the government working in the best interest of the people? Could the government have done more, or were they also victims of the Taliban?

12. Malala talks about the mission to capture and kill Osama bin Laden on pages 211-214, and expresses astonishment about his whereabouts: “He had been living in a large walled compound less than a mile from our military academy. We couldn't believe the army had been oblivious to bin Laden's whereabouts” (211). “You could see why anyone would think our intelligence service must have known bin Laden's location. ISI is a huge organization with agents everywhere” (212). Do you think she sounds similar to many Americans on the topic? Before reading Malala's book, were you aware that there were people in Pakistan who felt this way? Were any of Malala's examples of life under the Taliban a surprise to you? If so, which ones?

13. After Malala is shot, her family relocates to England. Malala discusses the loneliness of living there and how she knows she will return to Pakistan. Her father says, “No, Jani, your treatment is not complete,” and “The schools [in England] are good. You should stay here and gather knowledge so you can use your words powerfully” (311). What problems or complications do Malala and her family encounter while living abroad? Can she be as effective an advocate for women—especially Muslim women—if she is living in the U.K. rather than in Pakistan? Does living abroad influence her ability to present herself as representing the people of Pakistan and Muslims more generally?

References:

Yousafzai, Malala. “Address to the United Nations Youth Assembly.” United Nations, New York. 12 July 2013.



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