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Speak book club questions nonfiction

Use our general nonfiction questions to get book club discussions off to a good start. They're basic but smart. 1. If your book offers a cultural portrait—of life in another country or region of your own country, start with questions a, b, and c ... What observations are made in the book?Does the author examine economics and politics, family traditions, the arts, religious beliefs, language or food? Does the author criticize or admire the culture? Does he/she wish to preserve or change the way of life? Either way, what would be risked or gained? What is different from your own culture? What do you find most surprising, intriguing or difficult to understand? 2. What is the central idea discussed in the book? What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, political, economic, spiritual, medical, or scientific? 3. Do the issues affect your life? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?4. What evidence does the author use to support the book's ideas? Is the evidence convincing...definitive or...speculative? Does the author depend on personal opinion, observation, and assessment? Or is the evidence factual—based on science, statistics, historical documents, or quotations from (credible) experts?5. What kind of language does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it biased, inflammatory, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?6. What are the implications for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? Are they positive or negative...affirming or frightening?7. What solutions does the author propose? Are the author's recommendations concrete, sensible, doable? Who would implement those solutions?8. How controversial are the issues raised in the book? Who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?9. Talk about specific passages that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?10. What have you learned after reading this book? Has it broadened your perspective about a difficult issue—personal or societal? Has it introduced you to a culture in another country...or an ethnic or regional culture in your own country? (Questions by LILovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.) top of page Photo Courtesy: [Picture alliance/Getty Images; Goodreads] Now that we're more than halfway through year two of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's easy to feel a bit disconnected from the natural world. Between stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, and the important measures we've been taking to help stop the spread and keep people in our communities safe since March 2020, we haven't had much of a chance (besides our daily walks) to get out there and explore the great outdoors. Luckily, books are a fantastic way to indulge in some pandemic escapism and learn about nature, wildlife and conservation in the process. That's why we're celebrating the National Parks Service's 105th Anniversary with this roundup of nonfiction books that can help you slow down, pay attention to and reconnect with the natural world. Interested in learning more about climate change and the environment? Check out our books about climate change reading list and our roundup of movies and TV shows about environmental issues. "Vesper Flights" by Helen MacDonaldPhoto Courtesy: [Irina Street / 500px/Getty Images; Goodreads] Helen MacDonald's *Vesper Flights*, released in 2020, is a collection of previously published and new essays about the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. Covering topics like mushroom foraging, the 2014 solar eclipse and watching songbird migrations from the top of the Empire State Building, MacDonald's essays serve as reminders of the priceless nature of the plant and animal life surrounding us. *Vesper Flights* is MacDonald's followup to *H Is for Hawk*, her critically acclaimed memoir about grief, the sudden death of her father and her experiences training Northern Goshawks. *H Is for Hawk* is the recipient of the Samuel Johnson Prize and the 2014 Costa Book of the Year award. Helen MacDonald, who grew up in Surrey, England, is a naturalist, lecturer and faculty member at the University of Cambridge Department of History and Philosophy of Science. "The Living Mountain" by Nan ShepherdPhoto Courtesy: [VWB photos/Getty Images; Goodreads] The Cairngorm Mountains of northeast Scotland provide the setting for poet and mountaineer Nan Shepherd's meditative, lyrical volume about the intersection between mountains and the human imagination. Hailed by *The Guardian* as "the best book ever written on nature and landscape in Britain" and described by author Jeanette Winterson as "a kind of geo-poetic exploration of the Cairngorms," *The Living Mountain* vividly depicts the varied and diverse landscape of the Cairngorms in all seasons and weather. Written during the later years of World War II but not published until 1977, near the end of Shepherd's life, *The Living Mountain* is the result of Shepherd's lifelong obsession with the mountain range and her conviction that "Place and a mind may interpenetrate till the nature of both is altered." Shepherd, born in 1893, lived in her hometown of Aberdeen, Scotland, for most of her adult life. She worked as a lecturer in English at the Aberdeen College of Education and published several novels set in Northern Scotland. "Braiding Sweetgrass" by Robin Wall KimmererPhoto Courtesy: [Wolfgang Kaehler/Getty Images; Goodreads] In this ode to everything the plant world has to teach humankind, Robin Wall Kimmerer draws on her experience as an Indigenous scientist and botanist to tell a story about "indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinaabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most" in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. *Sweetgrass* (scientific name: *Hierochloa odorata*), a plant that's sacred to the Potawatomi people, is central to the book. "It is called wingaashk - the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth. Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten," Kimmerer writes in the preface. Through a series of interwoven narratives, Kimmerer advocates for a more reciprocal and interconnected relationship between humans and the natural world. *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a timely and urgent reminder of the value of Indigenous plant knowledge. But it's also an investigation into how this Indigenous knowledge can work hand in hand with the scientific method to support life on Earth and ultimately "heal our relationship with the world," as Kimmerer writes. Robin Wall Kimmerer is a botanist, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and an Indigenous scientist. She is the author of *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. Kimmerer is also an American Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental and Forest Biology at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. "The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature" by J. Drew LanhamPhoto Courtesy: [George Rose/Getty Images; Goodreads] In his 2016 memoir *The Home Place*, author J. Drew Lanham traces his family's history back to Edgefield County, South Carolina, where several generations of his ancestors were enslaved prior to the Civil War. Characterizing Edgefield County as somewhere "easy to pass by on the way somewhere else," Lanham interrogates his own complex relationship with the county, and, by extension, how living in Edgefield County shaped his identity as a Black man living in the rural South in the 1970s. *The Home Place* was listed as a "Best Book of 2016" by *Forwards Reviews* and was a *Nautilus Silver Award* Winner. William Souder, author of *Under a Wild Sky*, described the memoir as "a wise and deeply felt memoir of a black naturalist's improbable journey." Helen MacDonald, author of *Vesper Flights*, characterized *The Home Place* as "a groundbreaking work about race and the American landscape, and a deep meditation on nature, selfhood, and the nature of home." Lanham is a birder, naturalist and hunter-conservationist, as well as the Alumni Distinguished Professor of Wildlife Ecology and Master Teacher at Clemson University. His essays about the natural world can be found in *Orion*, *Flycatcher* and *Wilderness*. "Honouring High Places: The Mountain Life of Junko Tabei" by Junko TabeiPhoto Courtesy: [LAKPA SHERPA/Getty Images; Goodreads] For readers who are looking for a high-stakes adventure narrative, *Honouring High Places: The Mountain Life of Junko Tabei* fits the bill. Legendary Japanese mountaineer Junko Tabei was the first woman to summit Chomolungma (Everest) and climb the Seven Summits. Her memoir, released for the first time in English in 2017 (previously only available in Japanese), provides a fascinating glimpse into Japanese mountaineering culture and Tabei's groundbreaking life. *Honouring High Places* opens with Tabei's recollections from leading the first all-women team to summit Chomolungma, including a harrowing encounter with several avalanches on the mountain's slopes. In the memoir's diaristic format, Tabei also writes about the gender norms that shaped her childhood, her quest to climb Mount Tabor, her cancer diagnosis later in life, and the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima earthquake and tsunami. "Two Trees Make a Forest" by Jessica J. LeePhoto Courtesy: [Craig Ferguson/Getty Images; Goodreads] Jessica J. Lee's 2020 book, *Two Trees Make a Forest: In Search of My Family's Past Among Taiwan's Mountains and Coasts*, is delightfully difficult to categorize. Part historical narrative, part travelogue and part memoir, *Two Trees Make a Forest* starts with Lee's discovery of letters written by her grandfather, an immigrant from Taiwan. This leads Lee to travel to Taiwan, her family's ancestral home, where she discovers a new way to think about the links between her family lineage and the place where her ancestors lived. Lee traces the history of Taiwan from the Qing era up to present day and writes eloquently about Taiwan's natural landscapes, in what *Electric Literature* calls "a poetic tour and anti-colonial reclamation of the island through her descriptions of its flora, fauna, natural disasters, and political history." Jessica J. Lee is a British-Canadian-Taiwanese author, historian, environmentalist and the founding editor of *The Willowherb Review*. Lee is the winner of the 2019 RBC Taylor Prize Emerging Author Award and holds a doctorate in environmental history. "Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape" by Lauret SavoyPhoto Courtesy: [Education Images/Getty Images; Goodreads] Over the course of eight essays, Lauret Savoy investigates how American history and systemic racism have informed the way we think about place and regionality in *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*. Savoy's training as a geologist gives her a unique perspective on the intersection of history and place, and the result is a collection that writer and conservationist Terry Tempest Williams has called "a crucial book for our time, a bound sanity, not a forgiveness, but a reckoning." Lauret Savoy is a woman of African American, Euro-American and Native American heritage and is the David B. Truman Professor of Environmental Studies & Geology at Mount Holyoke College. Trace was the winner of the American Book Award (from the Before Columbus Foundation) and the ASLE Environmental Creative Writing Award and was a finalist for the PEN American Open Book Award. "Horizon" by Barry LopezPhoto Courtesy: [Avalon/Getty Images; Goodreads] Barry Lopez's sweeping, globe-spanning travel memoir couldn't have come at a better time. Released in January 2020, *Horizon* provided a much-needed bit of escapism for readers sheltering in place and quarantining due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Lopez's memoir is focused on his time spent in six regions — Coastal Oregon, the High Arctic, the Galápagos Islands, the Kenyan desert, Australia's Botany Bay and the glaciers of Antarctica. As Lopez unravels the histories of these places, he also looks inward, reminding the reader that "to inquire into the intricacies of a distant landscape, then, is to provoke thoughts about one's own interior landscape, and the familiar landscapes of memory." *Horizon* also interrogates our Earth's future, asking what should be done to slow global warming and providing readers with real-world examples of the damaging impacts of climate change. Barry Lopez is the author of *Arctic Dreams* (winner of the National Book Award), *Of Wolves and Men*, and *Crow and Weasel*. He received fellowships from the Guggenheim, Lannan and National Science foundations. Lopez died in 2020 at the age of 75. MORE FROM ASK.COM

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