

Reading Guide

Drowning Cactus

Questions for Discussion

1. Gordon's parents consider their son an embarrassment. Bryn and Jen see him as a sexy rebel. Mora, at least at first, thinks he's thoughtful, caring and wise. How would you describe Gordon Burstein?
2. Talk about Gordon's relationship with Rosa Vida. Do you see her as a mother figure? A love interest? Did you think Gordon should have done more to help her? Was it fair of her to ask him to bring her endangered cacti?
3. Did Mora overreact when the CitySprouts board fired her? Did she deserve the board's loyalty or were they within their rights to replace her with someone with new ideas? Was Carlos' herb gardening scheme misguided or did it have merit? Was Mora's cactus garden plan a better use of CitySprouts funds and energy, or was it folly?
4. What did you think of Mora's friendship with Carlos? Was it appropriate? Was it helpful for either of them?
5. What did you think of Gordon's relationship with Bryn? Did you feel as though he was cheating on Mora? Or treating Bryn unfairly?
6. Gordon's journey through the desert is an odyssey of sorts, replete with storms, sirens (Jen and Bryn), and even a Cyclops (the video camera on the border fence). Would you describe Gordon as a hero who survived a great journey? Or is his sense of accomplishment inflated?
7. Both Mora and Gordon encounter the Tohono O'odham in Arizona. Mora is enchanted and quickly allies herself with the tribe. Gordon remains an outsider, but has a more intimate experience of the Tohono O'odham's lives and challenges. Discuss the depictions of Native Americans in this novel. How did you respond to Mora's reaction to the tribe's drumming and chants? The down-home meal they shared with Gordon?
8. Will disappears overnight in the desert and reappears carrying a carcass of an endangered jaguar. Do you think he actually found the carcass? Did you agree with Mora's assessment that the evidence wouldn't make a difference for his case? What did you think of Will and his tactics?
9. Discuss Gordon's interaction with the media. What makes him a compelling subject for journalists? Did you see his continued attention as a statement about the media's willingness to cover stunts and not substance? Or did you think Gordon actually advanced important issues through his antics near the Mexican border and at Walden Pond?

10. When Mora and Gordon at last meet, their personalities don't mesh well. Do you think they have a romantic future? Do you think Mora can spend a year or more exploring the wilderness without specific plans? What do you think will happen to Gordon and Mora next?
11. Cacti appear throughout this book in Arizona, New Mexico, and Massachusetts. They are often assigned symbolic meaning. The cactus Gordon leaves in the road in Organ Pipe is described as a "beacon for immigrants" and a "powerful reminder of the mass destruction minimally regulated auto emissions are causing around the entire planet." Rosa's cactus sculpture is seen to represent "a proud survivor reminding us all of the toll of human consumption and violence." The cactus garden in Mora's backyard acts as a declaration of love. What does a cactus evoke for you? What do the plants mean to Gordon, Mora, and Carlos?
12. Mora's petty cash theft is dismissed by the president of her board as insignificant. Her dog-napping, ultimately, doesn't lead to any consequences. Gordon, on the other hand, is held in jail for simply moving a cactus. Are Mora and Gordon's crimes equally immoral? Have you ever stolen something or been tempted to do so?
13. Author Edward Abbey wrote, "The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders." Do people need to spend time in wilderness to recognize its value? Does wilderness have value? Would you want to retreat to nature like Mora and Gordon?
14. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote, "My greatest skill in life has been to want but little." How does Gordon embody Thoreau's ideals? Is Gordon an effective modern day environmentalist? Is Mora?
15. Mora feels most at home in the well-ordered world of gardening. Gordon prefers the wilderness. Which most appeals to you? Do you find inspiration in nature?

Read more about the author and *Drowning Cactus*, and share your thoughts at carrierussellbooks.wordpress.com.
