

THE ART OF SURRENDER

A Novel by Blair

FACILITATOR NOTES

Book Club Discussion Guide

WARNING

Contains Spoilers

These notes accompany the eleven discussion questions for *The Art of Surrender*. They are intended as a resource for facilitators — not a script, but a set of thematic anchors, character observations, and textual details that may help guide and deepen conversation. The questions are designed to reward readers who have sat with the novel; the guidance below is designed to help you sit with the questions.

The two protagonists — Ayman Saliba, 28, a Gibraltarian working in his family's yacht-supply business, and Lucas Pfifer, 29, a wealthy Swiss pharmaceutical executive — narrate in alternating parts. Ayman holds Parts 1, 3 and 5; Lucas holds Parts 2, 4 and 6. Their voices are quite different in register, and the novel exploits this asymmetry throughout. Where specific chapters are referenced below, they are offered as anchors, not directives: trust the group's own reading to find its own way in.

Question 1

The Airship theme runs throughout the book — discuss the similarities and differences for each occurrence.

Discussion guidance

The Airship chapters serve as tidal markers in the novel's structure, appearing twice in Ayman's point of view — Chapter 4 in Part 1 (Morocco) and Chapter 20 in Part 3 (the Mediterranean) — and their repetition is deliberate rather than decorative. In the first occurrence, the image arrives in the novel's opening act: it carries the quality of romantic aspiration, of something improbable and luminous floating above ordinary terrain. This is Ayman before knowledge, before consequence, before the full weight of what he is moving toward.

By the time the Airship appears again in Part 3, the relationship has acquired mass. There is accumulated experience between these two men, real stakes, and the shadow of what is coming in Part 5. Ask the group what has shifted in how the image lands. Is it more beautiful the second time, or more melancholy? Does it promise or does it lament? The facilitator might press whether the image represents the relationship itself — gorgeous, aloft, sustained by something not quite visible, not yet earthed. Both chapters appear in Ayman's sections: what does it mean that Lucas never narrates the airship? Does he see it at all?

Question 2

The relationships Ayman and Lucas have with their brothers have played an important part in each of their lives. Discuss the relationship and impact their brothers have had on each of the men.

Discussion guidance

Chapter 11 in Part 2 is titled simply 'The Brother' — weighted enough to name alone, which signals how much Paul Pfifer's presence means in Lucas's emotional architecture. Paul represents the family world Lucas has been performing within his entire life: the Pfifer register of achievement, appearance, and expectation. He is the standard against which Lucas has measured himself, consciously or not, and the encounter in Morocco is freighted with everything that standard has cost.

Elias Saliba carries different weight for Ayman. Where Paul is legacy and performance, Elias is closer kin — they have grown up in the same Gibraltarian world, the same family business, the same inherited expectations. For Ayman, who spent seven years in a relationship that didn't fit the shape of his actual life, his brother holds both the face of the world he is moving away from and, perhaps, the possibility of being understood by someone who shares his blood. Guide the group to compare not just the brothers themselves but what each protagonist most fears the brother will see — and whether that fear is ever resolved.

Question 3

The settings play an integral part of the book, each setting possessing anthropomorphic characteristics. Discuss each location, the characteristics and the relevance to Ayman and Lucas.

Discussion guidance

The novel's locations are participants, not backdrops, and each carries a distinct emotional function. The Hamam strips: it is a place architecturally designed for the removal of surface, where steam dissolves social armour and physical exposure precedes any other kind. The Riyad encloses: its courtyard turns inward away from the public street and becomes the container for early intimacy, a protected space that mirrors the tentative privacy the two men are beginning to construct. The Phoenix — the yacht — gives movement without fixed destination: a controlled space on uncontrolled water, which mirrors the relationship's Act II quality precisely. Gibraltar is Ayman's working world, the Chandlery specifically — salt and rope and practicality, his family's domain — and it cuts sharply against the romantic register of Morocco.

Switzerland and the Chalet are Lucas's inheritance: a site of performance, obligation, and cold particular beauty that explains a great deal about how he became who he is. Berlin is where architecture collapses — the city takes on the character of a breaking point, uncontained and harsh in ways that neither man planned for. Sydney, as the novel's final location, offers unfamiliar ground to both men equally, which is precisely its function: it is the one setting that belongs to neither, where what happens must be chosen rather than inherited. Ask the group which location they felt most viscerally as an emotional state, and why.

Question 4

The Art of Surrender names something both men are learning, but from opposite directions. How does each man's understanding of surrender evolve across the novel, and does the title mean the same thing by the end as it does at the beginning?

Discussion guidance

This is the novel's deepest territory and the richest ground for discussion. At the opening, surrender means fundamentally different things to each man, and neither is fully conscious of this divergence. For Lucas, surrender is the relief he has been privately seeking — a controlled release from the control that defines his public life. He has built an entire inner architecture around this need: it is rehearsed, it comes with established roles and ritual choreography. For Ayman, surrender doesn't yet have a name; he is learning what it means to inhabit his own desire rather than someone else's expectation of him, and he is doing it with enormous attentiveness and very little precedent.

The complication that drives the novel's conflict is that their surrenders, when they finally meet, don't fit each other cleanly. Lucas's version is practised and carries the residue of prior arrangements — particularly Lazarus — in ways Ayman doesn't initially understand. Ayman's version is raw, without the protective coating of experience. By the novel's end, surrender has been expanded by both men into something neither of them originally understood: not the giving up of power, but the willingness to be truly known — which requires a kind of courage that neither control nor passivity can provide. The facilitator should pose the question: does the title mean the same thing on the final page as it did on the first? Is it progress, or is it something harder to name?

Question 5

The novel opens in a hamam — a place designed for the removal of surface. How does the opening scene function as more than setting? What does it mean that this is where these two men first encounter each other?

Discussion guidance

A good opening does more than one thing, and this one does several. Mechanically, the hamam is a place of physical undressing: heat, water, the ritual of what is scrubbed away. But as a literary choice, it announces the novel's central preoccupation before any character has spoken: the removal of surface is what this story is about. The fact that Ayman and Lucas encounter each other here — before context, before social roles, before the information that usually determines how strangers perform toward each other — means their first impression is stripped back to something more essential. Body. Attention. Presence. The question of who is watching whom, and what each man's instinct is in a space designed for vulnerability, is worth spending time with.

The hamam also carries its own cultural history. In North African and Middle Eastern tradition, the hamam has long been a space of homosocial intimacy — of male bodies in proximity in ways that the public street does not permit. That history is in the air of the opening, whether the characters acknowledge it or not. Ask the group: what did they notice about the power dynamic in the first encounter? Who was doing the looking and who was being looked at? And does that distribution shift by the end of the scene — or by the end of the novel?

Question 6

Lucas appears to be the worldly, experienced guide and Ayman the younger, less certain one. In what ways does the novel quietly invert this, and at what point does the reader begin to understand who is actually the more fragile of the two?

Discussion guidance

The surface reading is seductive and the novel allows it to persist for a while: Lucas is older, wealthier, more practised in desire, a confident guide to unfamiliar territory. Ayman is new to this, finding his footing. But the novel is dismantling this arrangement from fairly early, and the evidence is largely physical. Lucas's bruising — the marks his body carries from the opening — is there for the reader to see and interpret before it is explained. His composure is practised rather than natural; his charm is a management tool rather than ease. His dry wit, which is genuinely funny, is also a form of deflection.

Ayman, by contrast, is slow and attentive in ways that Lucas is not. He notices what Lucas is doing with his irony and is too honest to pretend he doesn't. He pauses where Lucas accelerates. He cares in ways that Lucas — who is accustomed to being wanted but not necessarily cared for — doesn't know how to receive. The inversion becomes unavoidable in Part 5 in Berlin, when Lucas's architecture fails catastrophically, but a careful reader will have felt the shift well before that. The facilitator might ask the group to identify the specific moment when their reading of Lucas changed, and what the text was showing them that prompted it.

Question 7

Physical marks, injuries, rituals, and touch run throughout the book. How do both men use the body to communicate what they cannot or will not say aloud?

Discussion guidance

This is a novel in which the physical is never merely physical. Lucas's bruises and marks are visible from the beginning: they are evidence of the private self he has been keeping carefully separate from his public life, and they carry emotional information that dialogue hasn't yet transmitted. The hamam's rituals — the scrubbing, the steam, the particular choreography of that space — function as a grammar that both men enter before they have a shared spoken language. Touch throughout the novel is often a translation of what cannot be said: Ayman's attentive physical care is a form of acknowledgement that precedes and sometimes surpasses words.

The established rituals in Lucas's life — the choreography of desire that carries its own history with Lazarus and others — are a language, but one that was developed in another relationship's context. When Ayman encounters these rituals, the question is whether he is reading the same text or a different one. Ask the group to identify specific moments where a physical detail or gesture said something that dialogue could not have managed. What is the emotional content of those moments? And what would have been lost — or gained — if the characters had tried to speak it instead?

Question 8

Ayman and Lucas narrate in different registers — different emotional temperatures, different ways of seeing. What do we learn about each man specifically through the other's perspective?

Discussion guidance

Ayman and Lucas do not merely occupy different bodies — they process the world at different emotional temperatures, and the novel exploits this asymmetry. Ayman's narration is porous and attentive: he notices texture, smell, small gestures, the quality of light in a room. He lets things land on him. His emotional porousness is not weakness; it is perceptiveness. Lucas's narration is wrier, more defended, his intelligence deployed as a kind of insulation. His observations tend toward the ironic, and his irony is almost always protective rather than cruel.

What we learn about each man through the other's perspective is asymmetric and interesting. Ayman sees Lucas with a clarity that Lucas does not have about himself — he notices the management, the deflection, the gap between what Lucas projects and what his body is saying. Lucas, through his narration of Ayman, reveals something he hasn't confessed any other way: he is moved by Ayman's attentiveness in a manner he doesn't know what to do with. The facilitator might ask: which voice did the group trust more, and did that trust shift? Which narrator is the more reliable witness to the other? What does each man's narrative voice reveal that he is not consciously intending to confess?

Question 9

Both men have learned to divide themselves into acceptable and hidden parts. How does shame operate differently for each of them, and what does it cost each man to begin to dismantle it?

Discussion guidance

Shame is the engine underneath most of what this novel is actually about, and it runs differently in each man. For Lucas, shame is structural: he was raised inside a family and a world that required performance, and the private self he has cultivated — his actual desires, his actual needs, the very nature of his inner life — has been kept at a careful distance from the public one. The splitting is so complete, so long practised, that it has become identity. The cost of this division becomes catastrophically visible in Part 5 in Berlin, where the architecture that has sustained his double life can no longer hold.

For Ayman, shame has a different texture. He spent seven years in a heterosexual relationship — not one forced upon him, but one he allowed, partly because it was easier than confronting what he actually was. His shame is less about what he wants and more about the years he spent not allowing himself to want it, the loss of time and self that this entails. The facilitator should ask the group to be specific: what does each man's relationship to being seen in his private self look like in the novel? What triggers it? What softens it? And crucially — what does it actually take, in the specific texture of these two lives, to begin putting it down?

Question 10

The novel distinguishes between being wanted and being chosen. How does this distinction play out across the relationship, and which moments in the novel hinge on that difference?

Discussion guidance

Being wanted is about what you represent — your looks, your money, your social utility, your capacity to fill a role in someone else's story. Being chosen is about who you actually are when the role is stripped away. Lucas has been wanted throughout his life in precisely the first sense: his family wanted a particular version of him, Lazarus wanted something that Lucas provided, his professional world wants his performance. He has very little experience of being chosen without conditions. This is part of what makes Ayman's particular quality of attention so disorienting for him — Ayman keeps seeing past the performance to the person, which is both what Lucas most wants and what most frightens him.

For Ayman, the distinction arrives from a different angle. He is learning, across the novel, what it means to choose consciously rather than drift into a life that was mapped out for him — to choose his own desire, his own direction, and then to offer that active, awake choice to someone else. The Leather Bar chapter in Part 4 is worth discussing in some depth: what does it mean for one person to choose, in that space, and for the other not yet to understand that he is being offered something real? Ask the group to identify the moments in the novel where this distinction is most at stake. What does it mean, finally, to choose someone — and to know that you have been chosen in return?

Question 11

Water appears throughout the novel in many forms — the hamam, the Mediterranean voyage, the sea as both passage and threat. Discuss the water motif across the book: what does water represent at different points in the narrative, and how does its meaning shift for Ayman and Lucas as the story progresses?

Discussion guidance

Water in this novel is not a single symbol — it is a spectrum of states, and what it means keeps shifting depending on which man encounters it and what the story needs at that moment. The hamam is the logical place to begin: water here is ritual, ceremonial, an agent of transformation. The steam and heat of the hamam are designed to open the body, to remove what has accumulated on the surface, and the encounter between Ayman and Lucas happens in this context of deliberate unmaking. Water in the hamam represents the possibility of return to something more essential — a self before the performance of self. It is also, crucially, controlled water: channelled, heated, applied with intention. This is the first form water takes in the novel, and it is the most benign.

The Mediterranean sailing voyage in Part 3 introduces water in an entirely different register. The Phoenix gives both men a space of genuine intimacy — removed from their ordinary lives, stripped of context, suspended between ports — and the sea itself participates in that suspension. Water as passage, as the distance between places and between former and future selves, is one of the novel's more sustained images here. But the sea is also not controllable: a yacht is an act of confidence in something that could, at any moment, withdraw its cooperation. The facilitator should press the group to examine the dual nature of the Mediterranean in this section — how it functions simultaneously as a space of freedom and as an environment that carries the possibility of real danger.

The medevac sequence — water as site of crisis, the sea as something that nearly swallows one of these men — represents the motif's sharpest turn. Here water becomes threat, becomes the element that forces a reckoning. The contrast with the hamam is pointed: the hamam's water cleanses by design; the sea's water endangers without intention. What the medevac does structurally is convert the abstract stakes of the relationship into something physical and irreversible — the sea makes the crisis real in a way that a hotel room argument could not. Ask the group to consider how the meaning of water has shifted by this point in the narrative. Has it moved from purification to danger, or is the danger a kind of purification too — a more violent version of the hamam's principle?

For Ayman and Lucas individually, water may carry different valences worth tracing through the novel. Ayman is from Gibraltar — a port city, a place defined by the meeting of sea and land, of passage and arrival. For him water is probably more familiar, less exotic, perhaps less charged. Lucas's world is landlocked and mountainous — Switzerland, the chalet, snow rather than sea. What does it mean that so much of their relationship unfolds on and beside water that is Ayman's element rather than Lucas's? Who is on native ground? The facilitator might close by asking whether either man is the same person at the end of the novel as he was when he first entered the water — and whether the answer is the same for both.

Trust the group's reading.