



"Théodora Armstrong perfectly captures that in-between existence of expats adrift: the lonely friendships and frenetic love affairs, the lives that intertwine like contrails in an empty sky." —WILL FERGUSON

WELCOME TO SUNNY TOWN

a novel

DISCUSSION GUIDE

THÉODORA ARMSTRONG



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel explores the tension between self-discovery and self-erasure as motivations for living abroad. To what extent is Maggie's move driven by a desire to reinvent herself versus a desire to disappear? Are other characters in the book driven by the same motivations?
2. Did you find Maggie and her friends sympathetic? Frustrating? Both? How did your feelings towards the characters change over the course of the book?
3. The novel is set around the turn of the millennium and the events of 2001. How does that historical moment influence the atmosphere of the book? How important is place in the novel? Would Maggie's journey have unfolded differently if she had moved somewhere other than Japan?
4. The expat community in Sunny Town is both welcoming and destructive. Why do you think Maggie is drawn to this intense social circle? Are there points in the book where she wants to escape?
5. Which friendship or relationship in the novel felt most authentic to you? Why?
6. How does the novel explore the difference between genuine cultural engagement and merely working as a foreigner in another country? Is there a meaningful distinction between the terms expat and foreigner, and what do these words reveal about ideas of identity, belonging, and privilege?
7. What did you think of the novel's portrayal of teaching English abroad and the ESL industry? Was there anything that surprised you?
8. Keiko becomes an important figure in Maggie's life. What does their friendship offer that Maggie's relationships with other foreigners cannot? Are there any parallels in their character arcs?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

9. Many of the characters in the novel seem lost despite having chosen an adventurous life. How are freedom and loneliness linked in the novel?
10. How do the communication technologies available to Maggie in 2001—internet cafés, letters, expensive long-distance rates—shape her sense of connection and disconnection from home, and how might her experience differ in today’s era of smartphones, social media, and constant connectivity?
11. What roles do illusion and performance play in the story? Which characters are most honest with themselves, and which are living in denial?
12. What scene, image, or line has stayed with you since finishing the book, and why?
13. Throughout the novel, Maggie struggles to take herself seriously as an artist. Why do you think she has such a hard time seeing value in what she has to offer? What forces in the book disrupt her artistic journey? What forces help her thrive? What part of her journey resonated most with you?
14. In the Shinto religion deer are revered as sacred messengers of the gods. Do you think the deer in the internet café parking lot had a message for Maggie? If so, what is the message?



PRAISE FOR WELCOME TO SUNNY TOWN

“*Welcome to Sunny Town* brought back a flood of memories for me, both poignant and funny, of my own time as an ESL teacher in Japan a million years ago. The world has changed, but the human heart has not, and Théodora Armstrong perfectly captures that in-between existence of expats adrift: the lonely friendships and frenetic love affairs, the lives that intertwine like contrails in an empty sky. An exceptionally nuanced novel.”
WILL FERGUSON, author of the Japanese-based mystery *Office Shimada and the Disappearing Girl*

“I’m such a fan of Théodora Armstrong’s writing, and this debut novel is a stunner. I loved Maggie, her protagonist, who so beautifully personifies the wayward difficulty of youth and the struggle to believe in yourself as an artist. From its settings in Vancouver and Japan to the scenes of friendship and love and everything in between, *Welcome to Sunny Town* is fully imagined and wonderfully alive.”
ALIX OHLIN author of *We Want What We Want and Dual Citizens*

“Set in the unsettled days of the new millennium, *Welcome to Sunny Town* follows a group of young English teachers as they navigate each other amidst the dimly lit side streets and glowing neon nights of Japan. This is chronicle of a feeling: that formative loneliness of new freedom, of being forged from an alloy of life and fate, of being a stranger in a place of fellow strangers. Armstrong gives us a generous novel, a heartfelt guidebook for that foggy, liminal place where we struggle to find ourselves, rail against becoming some unwanted inevitable, and eventually find that place within, where we are. This is the best kind of fiction, honest and open, a gift to the reader.”
BRADLEY SOMER, author of *Fishbowl* and *We Are All of Us Left Behind*

“Attentive to the power dynamics between expats and locals, and to the insidious, self-sealing nature of expatriate circles, Théodora Armstrong’s *Welcome to Sunny Town* takes on the texture of an anthropological study—observant and unsparing about who holds language, mobility, and cultural capital. Here, the absurdity of the ESL industry mirrors that of those who dwell within it: well-meaning, often unconsciously entitled, and ill-equipped to teach in a system built on performance and projection. Raw and bracingly fresh, the novel’s power lies in being one of the few expat stories that refuse fantasy.”
SHEUNG-KING, author of *Batshit Seven*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Théodora Armstrong is a fiction writer, poet, and photographer. Her first collection of short fiction, *Clear Skies, No Wind, 100% Visibility*, was a finalist for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award for Fiction, and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. Her award-winning stories have appeared in numerous literary magazines across Canada and have also been included in both the *Journey Prize Anthology* and *Coming Attractions*. Armstrong holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia where she also taught fiction for a decade in the School of Creative Writing. *Welcome to Sunny Town* is her debut novel. Currently, she lives in North Vancouver with her husband and two children.