



READING GROUP GUIDE

1. The novel begins with Leila visiting an exhibition of Azerbaijani art in Los Angeles where she sees and recognizes herself in the Maiden Tower painting as “*a lonely princess—half human, half bird—standing on its crown, her wings reaching into the dome of the wakening sky.*” The novel ends with Leila returning to Baku and climbing to the top of Maiden Tower. Why did the artist paint Leila in this way? And why do you think that the author choose to frame the novel with those scenes?
2. Soviet Azerbaijan in 1979 was supposed to be a “classless” society, but there are several indicators that this is a fallacy (for example, Leila belonging to the Communist royalty—*Nomenklatura*). What did you think about this “classless” society? Do you think it’s possible to have a society without class designations?
3. The novel is filled with descriptions of Baku on the crossroads of Turkish, Persian, and Russian cultures. How does the author create the imagery of this city using music and legends rooted in those cultural traditions?
4. In the novel, we see Communism fighting a “two-headed hydra”—religious fervor coming from the East and toxic hedonism (or the perception of such) coming from the West. We

commonly think of those two ideologies warring against each other, but not against a third party in Communism. Discuss this unusual battle that takes place in Soviet/Islamic Azerbaijan—the last outpost of European Communism as it makes its way farther into Asia.

5. How does the author transcribe music into words using metaphors, fine art imagery, colors, and emotions? Are there any examples that particularly stood out to you?
6. Comrade Farhad sends Leila to spy on an American mole and his music shop that is supposedly a cover-up for anti-Soviet activities. Instead, Aladdin's shop becomes Leila's haven. Discuss Leila's transformation from a dedicated young Communist into a free-spirited artist.
7. Leila's mother describes Azerbaijan as the "kingdom of crooked mirrors." Everyone in this novel seems to live with lies. Are there some lies that you forgive more easily than others? If yes, which ones are they, and why are they more easily forgivable?
8. The fairy tales and legends of Azerbaijan often serve as emotional references and metaphors throughout the novel. Discuss how the storyline mimics the Maiden Tower Legend; how the Legend of the Stone Heart mirrors Leila's fear of being rejected by Tahir; how an encounter with the Peri Fairy reveals Leila's guilt-torn soul.
9. How do Leila and Tahir unveil the ambiguities between music and art, friendship and love?
10. Leila betrays Tahir and later marries into the KGB—all for the sake of her music career, only to fail miserably at her most important final performance in London. Why?

THE ORPHAN SKY

11. Much of classical, jazz, and traditional Azerbaijani music flows throughout this novel: Chopin's *Ballade no. 1*; Czerny's *The Art of Finger Dexterity*; Beethoven's *Sonata Pathétique*; Mozart's *Piano Concerto no. 20*; Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto no. 3*; Tikhon Khrennikov's *Five Pieces for Piano*; Billie Holiday's "Body and Soul"; Nina Simone's "Strange Fruit"; and traditional Azerbaijani *muğams*. Listen to these musical works and discuss their depictions in the novel. Does the author's musical/literary palette resonate with your own imagery?

12. What do you think of the novel's ending? What do you think will happen with Tahir and Leila after the novel ends?