

Discussion Questions for *From This Wicked Patch of Dust*

From This Wicked Patch of Dust, by Sergio Troncoso

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<http://sergiotroncoso.com/dust/questions/index.htm>

1. What do you think is the significance of the parents' names, **Pilar** and **Cuauhtémoc**? What are the etymologies of these names?
2. Why do you think the author structures the story in *From This Wicked Patch of Dust* in time fragments? What effect does this have on the storytelling and character development? How is this reflective of what is happening to the Martinez family over time?
3. What do the alternating perspectives in chapters, from different family members, reveal about group life within a family? When do you see significant differences in the interpretation of important family events? Why?
4. What is the author indicating about 'group life' versus 'individual life' within a family? What forms a group, how does it stay a group, and what disintegrates it? Can a new group be formed from the remnants of the values of an old group? How is the novel an allegory of what is happening in our multi-ethnic, religiously diverse, politically fragmented country?
5. How is the island metaphor used throughout this novel, and what are its multiple meanings?
6. Compare and contrast the different personalities of the children, **Julia**, **Francisco**, **Marcos**, and **Ismael**. What are their different relationships to home and Ysleta? What do you think the author is saying about leaving home, or coming back home, or even recreating your home in a new place?
7. What creates the sense of home for the Martinez family from Ysleta? Is it religion? Geography? The hard work the family must do together to survive? Is it loyalty to and respect for parents? What do you think the author is saying about the complex set of values that make up a home? What undermines those values?
8. Analyze the relationship between **Julia** and her mother **Pilar**. In what way does the daughter rebel against and reject the mother's values? How does **Julia** also adhere to these values, and make them her own?
9. How do **Ismael's** innate curiosity and intelligence separate him from his family? How does he use these characteristics to come back to them? Do you think the Chicano community easily accepts nerds, bookworms, or philosophical outcasts? Why or why not? What kind of problems would these kinds of individuals face in any community?

10. Compare and contrast **Francisco's** and **Ismael's** relationship to the family. Is it better that **Francisco** never leaves El Paso, or that **Ismael** leaves El Paso for Harvard and the East Coast? Is it a function of their different characters that they take different routes in life? Do you think the author is saying the dutiful son is better, or worse, than the curious son? What do you gain and lose by never leaving home? What do you gain and lose by leaving the place where you were born?
11. Analyze **Ismael's** effort to nurture his literary voice as a writer. What internal obstacles must he overcome? What external ones must he confront? Why? How is being a writer a solitary existence, and how it is also an existence embedded in society?
12. Compare and contrast the different ways in which **Pilar** and **Cuauhtémoc** believe in Catholicism. How and why do you think their approach to religion is different? How do their religious beliefs affect how they treat **Julia**, their daughter who converted to Islam, and **Lilah**, their Jewish daughter-in-law?
13. Analyze how **Ismael**, as a husband and father, has broken from the traditions and values he learned at home in Ysleta, and how he also adapted and transformed these values in new ways in New York. Why has he done this? How do you think parenting and gender roles are changing in the Mexican-American community? Why?
14. Describe the benefits and detriments of the interfaith, intercultural marriages in the novel: **Ismael** and **Lilah**, **Julia-Aliyah** and **Mohammed**, and **Marcos** and **Lori**. What do you gain and lose when you marry outside your religion, outside your culture? Why do you think Latinos have one of the highest rates of intermarriage among ethnic groups? Why do some of these marriages succeed, and why do others fail?
15. Analyze **Marcos's** letters in the penultimate chapter, "The War in Ysleta." How and why do the style and content change as **Marcos** writes to a different family member? Do you think, as **Marcos** says, that when you write you can say things that you cannot say in person? Why or why not? He also writes that "you can push the world away a bit whenever you write" and send "a piece of myself away" to someone who will read his words later. What does this mean, and why should this matter for any writer?
16. How is the novel, in a way, the manifestation of **Ismael's** literary voice? What does it mean to be able to put the life of the Martinez family into words and a story? How does a story bring disparate people together, and make them empathize with others? How is the novel an answer to **Pilar's** loss of meaning and faith in the world? How does writing help you to believe in the world?

Contact:

Sergio Troncoso
SergioTroncoso@gmail.com
www.SergioTroncoso.com

