

"[This] love story has hypnotic power." — *The New Yorker*

"Universally salient and timely." — *The Rumpus*

UNDER
the
UDALA TREES

a novel



CHINELO
OKPARANTA

A Discussion Guide

Questions

1. What did you learn about Nigeria's civil war? What role does it play in this novel? What is the significance of Ijeoma and Amina being from separate tribes?
2. What is "ubosi chi ji ehihe jie" or "the day night fell in the afternoon," and how does it impact the lives of Ijeoma and her family? What does her father tell Ijeoma about worrying? Why does he stay in the house rather than join his family in the bunker?
3. After her father's death, Ijeoma begins to think that perhaps the nature of life is change. Does her view on this subject evolve throughout the story? Is change ultimately presented as a positive force or a negative one?
4. Why does Ijeoma's mother send Ijeoma off to stay with the grammar school teacher and his wife? When Ijeoma's mother comes back for her, what is their reconciliation like? What do these scenes reveal about their relationship?
5. Does Ijeoma believe that she acted in error or feel any guilt? How do her mother's and the teacher's responses affect her self-perception and life choices? Is she affected by the views on sexuality that she comes to see are held by society? Is the author offering a commentary on how LGBT citizens are treated in Nigeria today?
6. Explore the effects of war on those it touches in the book. Who does the war seem to have the greatest impact on? How are the lives of the characters altered by the war going on around them? Does the author provide a clear sense of what the warring groups are fighting over? Ultimately, what view of war and conflict or message(s) about war and conflict does the author offer to her readers?
7. Consider how love is defined within the novel. What examples of love are present throughout? Look at the various relationships depicted within the story. Does any single definition or view of love seem to stand out from all the rest?
8. Ijeoma frequently recalls the folktales that were told to her as a child. What kinds of lessons do these folktales impart? What role do folktales play, then, in teaching concepts of "right" and "wrong" to children? What does this indicate about storytelling and the importance of literature?
9. How does Ijeoma react to the Bible lessons that she sits through with her mother? What does Ijeoma suggest about the Bible stories that her mother reads with her? What message or messages might this offer about allegory and the way that we read and interpret texts?

10. Evaluate the theme of faith in the novel. Consider Ijeoma’s relationship to God and religion. Is there ultimately a conflict between Ijeoma’s faith and her desires? What other examples of faith are presented in the book?

11. When Amina marries, Ijeoma feels that she has been betrayed. Are there other examples of betrayal found in the story? Do the characters regret these betrayals? Are their choices justifiable? Do they seek or find forgiveness?

12. Why does Ijeoma marry Chibundu? Evaluate the depiction of their marriage in the story. What role does marriage seem to play within the culture? Does this help us to better understand Ijeoma’s decision?

13. In Chapter 56, Ijeoma sits in church thinking about a baby who was born with a harelip a few months earlier. Why is she so taken by this? What does Ijeoma say that the fate of the baby reveals about the treatment of “anything outside the norm” (228)?

14. How does Chibundu treat his daughter? What do his feelings reveal about the treatment of women and gender roles in this culture? How does this compare to the treatment of women in other cultures? How does it compare to the treatment of women in your own country today? Does Chibundu ever change his behaviour?

15. Why does Ijeoma ultimately leave Chibundu? How did Chibundu respond? And how did you respond as a reader? Where does Ijeoma ultimately end up? Do you consider this a happy ending?

16. Explore the motif of dreams in the story. In the Epilogue, Ijeoma says, “[i]n a life story full of dreams, there are even more dreams” (315). What does she mean by this? How important or meaningful are dreams to the characters who have them? What do the dreams reveal about the characters?

17. At the conclusion of the story, Ijeoma speaks of her fondness for Hebrews 8 and the importance of change and revision. Is there some way that necessary change and the passing down of traditions can be reconciled, or will the two always be at odds? Must traditions be discarded or eschewed for the greater benefit of society and its members?

18. What is Ijeoma’s understanding of God? Where do you see different interpretations of faith throughout the book, and what does that mean for the different characters and their relationships with each other?

Suggestions for Further Reading

ACHEBE, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*
ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*
AKPAN, Uwem. *Say You’re One of Them*
ATTA, Sefi. *Everything Good Will Come*
COLE, Teju. *Open City*
DANTICAT, Edwidge. *Claire of the Sea Light*

EMECHETA, Buchi. *The Joys of Motherhood*
HALL, Radclyffe. *The Well of Loneliness*
HALLBERG, Garth Risk. *City on Fire*
MATAR, Hisham. *In the Country of Men*
ODUOR, Okwiri. "My Father's Head"
OWUOR, Yvonne Adhiambo. *Dust*
VAN DEN BERG, Laura. *The Isle of Youth*
WHITE, Edmund. *A Boy's Own Story*