



MISSING IN MACHU PICCHU

About This Guide



We hope that these discussion questions will enhance your reading group's exploration of Cecilia Velástegui's novel, *Missing in Machu Picchu*. They are intended to stimulate discussion, offer new viewpoints, and enrich your enjoyment of the book.



Questions for Discussion

1. The volatile weather conditions create an atmospheric backdrop to the events in the novel. In what ways does the weather foreshadow the events both at the beginning and the end of the story?
2. Taki and Koyam are lifelong friends with a strong, close relationship, yet they seem to bicker constantly. What are the events and life experiences that bind them?
3. Taki and Koyam want to maintain a close bond with their descendants, yet they often feel rebuffed by the younger generation. Discuss the ways that the elderly women try to stay connected with their descendants.
4. The novel addresses many levels of gossip and subversive alternative narratives, from the buzz among the denizens of the Plaza to exploration of the secrets and rumors surrounding the history of Hiram Bingham to the lies told on online dating sites. Is gossip an inescapable fact of life? Can it have positive as well as dangerous consequences?
5. In the novel, the (fictional) online dating sites are skewered for allowing—or even encouraging—participants to misrepresent themselves. What are your thoughts on the ethics of online dating sites? Is it inevitable that users will make exaggerated claims about their personal appearance, achievements, and qualities? If so, how could these misrepresentations affect a romantic relationship?

6. Why do you think that Hilary, Gabby and Mercy are so disappointed with the results of their online dating experiences?
7. Why is the notion of destroying an effigy of their online dating partners so appealing to the female hikers? What do they hope to achieve?
8. By infiltrating Gabby's Ivy League-alumnae blog, Sandra ingratiates her way into a free trip to Peru. In what ways can the anonymity of the Internet facilitate opportunists like Sandra?
9. What are the stereotypes of tourists that arrive by the droves in Cusco and Machu Picchu? Why does Taki show compassion towards them? Why does Koyam disapprove?
10. Many of the historical characters mentioned in the novel rebelled against the domination of the Spanish during Peru's colonial era. Why do you think that the inhabitants of Machu Picchu and its surroundings did not protest Hiram Bingham's excavations at the Inca citadel in 1912–1915?
11. When the novel reveals the unofficial version of Hiram Bingham's exploration of Machu Picchu, what is suggested of his attitude towards the inhabitants, and to the valuable artifacts taken by his expedition?
12. Why does Taki play down her shamanistic/clairvoyant gifts? Would she be so humble if she didn't have Koyam around to keep her down-to-earth?
13. Does Rodrigo's early childhood in any way explain his eventual narcissistic and megalomaniacal disorders?
14. What is symbolic about Taki's colorful *llicllas*-shawls?
15. Does the character of the Corsican swami represent total, premeditated evil? In what ways are his actions different from the cruelty of Rodrigo? In what ways is his approach to revenge different from that of Violette?

16. Choque and the porters are defeated men who put faith in the promises of the volatile Rodrigo. Why do they remain loyal to Rodrigo for so long?
17. In what ways might a return to the authentic Inca ways be beneficial for the indigenous people of the Andes?
18. Why were three highly educated and attractive women so easily seduced by a charlatan like Rodrigo?
19. The novel highlights the contrasts between modern technology and the traditional ways of the Andes. When the torrential rains and floods destroy all communications on the Inca Trail, what are the consequences for the group of hikers? How is their way of thinking and reliance on technology an anachronism in this context?
20. How are all the women on the hike untrue to themselves and to others? How did their insincerity affect their relationships, and the trek itself?
21. Taki gives blessings that are particular to the person in question. What was meant by her blessing to the Corsican swami: “You must accept the fate you’ve earned?” How could this blessing also apply to the other characters?
22. Many of the characters have pent-up anger and the desire for vengeance. Do any of them get satisfaction by seeking revenge?
23. In what ways does Tiffany represent the modern, self-absorbed, shallow individual? Is her behavior rewarded? Does she ever change her ways?
24. Although Taki tries to keep up with modern technology and trends, she is ultimately bound to the traditions of the Andean highlands. Do you feel some of her beliefs or her way of looking at the world have value in contemporary life?

25. What emotional or spiritual void do some 21st-century tourists hope to fill by visiting a site like Machu Picchu?
26. Taki finally resolves to ask the counsel and assistance of her ancestor mummy. How does the mummy give Taki and Koyam confidence in their fight against Rodrigo?
27. In what ways does the ancestral mummy represent the genuine heartfelt notion of doing what is right?
28. How does the mummy oracle communicate with Taki? Could it be argued that it was Taki's own consciousness—her intuition—that helps her to do the right thing?
29. The ancestral mummy in this novel was revered by Taki. Do you think it's possible to connect with the past in this way? What do you feel about the contention that “a preserved body is a host to the soul?”
30. The charges of infant trafficking against Rodrigo were dropped at the inquest. However, the novel cites several documented incidences of infant trafficking. What do you think are the causes of this heinous illegal activity? What can be done to stop it?
31. Do the women finally realize that cyberspace only offered them illusive romance? Will any of them continue looking for love through online dating sites?
32. How can an ‘adventure’ vacation in a foreign country offer solutions to problems faced back home? Is it possible for brief trips to be transformative experiences?