

Discussion Questions for
THE TEARS OF DARK WATER
by Corban Addison

(1) At the beginning of the story, Ismail and his crew appear to have a fairly straightforward reason for hijacking the *Renaissance*: Old-fashioned greed and opportunism. As the story progresses, however, we see that the knot of wrong is far more complex. We learn about the tragedy of Ismail's life, the horrors he suffered at the hands of Al-Shabaab, and his extraordinary commitment to reunite with Yasmin. We also learn of the desperation that compelled his confederates to join him at sea. In your mind, who bears ultimate responsibility for Daniel Parker's death and Quentin's injuries? Is it enough to say that the pirates are responsible, or do others share the blame?

(2) Some have said that love born in the crucible of extreme circumstances is doomed to failure. At the outset of the story, Daniel hopes that his voyage around the world will offer him a chance to salvage his marriage. Vanessa, however, is not so sanguine. Given the burdens of their shared history, do you think Daniel was naïve in thinking the trip might have that effect? Had the hijacking not happened and Daniel had returned home to the realities of ordinary life, do you think he and Vanessa would have stayed together?

(3) After the hijacking, Vanessa learns that the U.S. government has a "no concessions" policy in negotiating with pirates. While she understands the government's desire to avoid ransom payments, she is more concerned about the safety of her family than about deterring future hostage taking. What do you think about the "no concessions" policy? How should a nation balance the social cost of hostage taking against the personal cost of discouraging a hostage's family from negotiating a ransom (or banning them outright when the kidnappers are terrorists)? What do you think about Julius Caesar's approach, which Paul Derrick advocates—pay the ransom to save the hostage's life, then bring the kidnappers to justice?

(4) On the bridge of the *Gettysburg*, Paul Derrick reconnects with the tragedy of his brother's suicide and his father's murder in a profoundly personal way. Do you think this sense of *déjà vu* clouds or clarifies his judgment about Ismail's intentions?

(5) After the SEALs of DEVGRU rescue the kidnapped aid workers in Somalia, Paul Derrick draws a conclusion about the efficacy of special forces units in hostage rescue operations: Even the most highly trained troops require proper conditions for a successful mission. Recent news stories about unsuccessful SEAL raids in Somalia and Yemen—one of which led to the deaths of two hostages—underscore this point. In light of the dangers associated with hostage rescue operations, do you think Western governments are justified in

relying so heavily on the military to resolve hostage crises?

(6) Beneath the surface of the story is the clash—both practical and theological—between moderate and radical Islam. Ismail and his family are devout Muslims, but they believe the violent creed of Al-Shabaab is a fundamental perversion of their faith. Najib, on the other hand, is confident of his own devotion, yet he believes that Adan, Ismail's father, is an apostate worthy of death. Radical groups like Al-Shabaab have proliferated in recent years. In your mind, what is the responsibility of the broader Muslim community in countering those who advocate and perpetrate violence in the name of Islam? How can people of goodwill outside the Muslim community aid their Muslim neighbors in challenging violent interpretations of their faith?

(7) At the heart of Ismail's story is the age-old conflict between morality and necessity. Ismail knows that hostage taking for ransom is reprehensible. He knows the Quran and remembers his father's teachings about perdition. Yet his father is dead—murdered by the men he opposed with education and reason—and Ismail is adrift in a world of lawlessness and violence. In this context, he concludes that the only way left to him to save his sister is the way of the gun. What do you think about his reasoning? How does necessity shape a person's moral conclusions? In your mind, is it ever justified for a person to engage in criminal activity that endangers innocent life in order to save the life of another?

(8) Soon after Yasmin escapes from Najib's clutches, she witnesses an American drone strike against Najib's village. In the aftermath of the explosion, she is overcome by emotion—horror, grief, fear, and guilt—as she wrestles with the unintended consequences of her actions. Eventually, after consoling herself that Ismail would not have involved her in the murder of innocent people, she feels great relief, knowing that Najib's reign of terror has come to an end. Ismail, too, feels relief and vindication when he learns of Najib's death, despite his misgivings about drone warfare. What do you think about the American drone program? Is drone warfare justified if only terrorists are killed? How does your thinking change when you take into account the inevitability of collateral damage?

(9) At the end of Ismail's story, he is convicted of piracy under the law of nations, among other crimes, and he is sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Are you satisfied with this outcome? Do you feel it is too lenient or too harsh? What do you think about the request Ismail makes of his uncle, Mahamoud—to use the ransom money he obtained from prior hijackings to reopen his father's school in Mogadishu? Knowing what you do about Mahamoud, do you think he will honor Ismail's request?

(10) The Somali nation is at the center of the story—the twenty-year civil war, the refugee crisis, piracy and terrorism, the use of child soldiers in the conflict, the forced marriage of

young girls to Shabaab commanders, and the African Union's protracted struggle to drive Al-Shabaab out of power. How has your impression of Somalia changed in reading the story? For those of us outside the Somali community, what can we do to assist Somalis like Dr. Hawa Abdi—whose real-life humanitarian camp is highlighted in the story—in rebuilding their nation?

(11) In the final chapter of the story, Vanessa wrestles with one of the greatest questions in human experience: Is forgiveness possible in the face of irremediable wrong? What do you think about her answer to this question? If you were in her position, having suffered as she suffered, how would you answer this question?