

Discussion Questions for A Harvest of Thorns

1. In the opening chapters of the story, Cameron travels to Bangladesh and meets with Habib Khan, owner of Rahmani Apparel. After being caught in a lie, Habib confesses to Cameron that he colluded with Presto's local office director in subcontracting part of the order to Millennium, in violation of Presto's Code of Conduct. By way of explanation, Habib tells Cameron about the dilemma he faces. His profits are falling. His competitors outside Bangladesh are undercutting him with superior technology, cheaper labor, and vertical integration. At the same time, Presto is demanding lower prices and faster turnarounds, or it will take its orders elsewhere. In this environment, he has no choice but to agree to Presto's terms and then to find a way to deliver. What does this dilemma reveal about the power dynamics within the global fashion industry? In your mind, which party (a supplier like Rahmani, or a brand like Presto), bears more responsibility for working conditions and worker safety at the factory level?
2. In Josh's meeting with Tony Sharif in Washington, DC, Tony introduces Josh to Rana Jalil. As Tony puts it, Rana is shining a light into the dark hole of American fast fashion. When Josh asks for an explanation, Tony expounds: "You know those teeny bopper stores in the mall, the ones that dress their mannequins like hookers and make you want to keep Lily under lock and key? . . . A lot of the clothes they peddle are made in sweatshops in L.A. The fashion companies know about it, but they don't give a rat's ass. So long as they keep feeding American teens a fad a week, they see it as the cost of doing business." What does this revelation say about the label "Made in the USA?" Does it surprise you that worker abuse is rife in fast fashion garment production in the United States? What, if anything, do you think should be done about it?
3. What were your initial impressions of Cameron at the beginning of the story? How did those impressions change as his investigation proceeded and he began to advocate for internal change? At what point did you realize that he was Josh's source? How did that realization affect your feelings toward Cameron? At the end of the story, what were your final impressions of him, both as a business executive and as a man?
4. Cameron's decision to betray his company in order to save it is a profound one. The risks are monumental. If the lawsuit goes to trial, he will almost certainly be exposed. If the case destroys Presto, he will go down with it. If Josh fails to keep his identity secret, he will have to flee the country and live in exile or face massive fines and jail time. Cameron is a master strategist, but he isn't delusional. He knows there are variables beyond his control. What compels him to make such an extraordinary gamble? How much is his decision influenced by his ideals? By his guilt over Presto's complicity in the suffering of Sonia, Jashel, and Alya, among others? By his culpability in Olivia's death? By the connection he feels to his ancestor, Cornelius, and his failed quest for reparations? By his desire, as a son, to do something that would make his father proud?
5. In their independent investigations overseas, Cameron and Josh discover all manner of worker abuse, corporate complicity, and even criminal behavior within Presto's apparel

supply chains. In Bangladesh, bottom tier factories like Millennium are inherently dangerous to workers like Nasima and Sonia. In Malaysia, even in the best factories, some foreign workers like Jashel are hired under false pretenses and forced to work without pay for years. In the worst factories, workers are treated like beasts of burden. In Jordan, female garment workers like Alya are sexually abused by their supervisors. How do these discoveries make you feel about the clothes you are wearing right now? What do you think should be done to improve the rights and treatment of garment workers in the developing world? Should brand like Presto make more clothing in countries where legal protections for workers are stronger? What role should governments and labor unions play?

6. After the filing of the lawsuit and the dueling press conferences, Josh and friends from the *Washington Post* visit a Presto superstore in the rush before Black Friday. Josh interviews a diverse array of shoppers, all of whom have different opinions about the allegations and what relevance, if any, they have to the shoppers' buying decisions. What did you feel about these exchanges, particularly the final exchange between Alisa and Donna? Have you ever wondered whether the products you buy—clothing or otherwise—are ethically made? How does that concern affect your decisions as a consumer?

7. In Vance's remarks at the press conference, he issues an apology to Sonia, Ashik, Jashel, and Alya for the suffering they have experienced. But he denies that Presto caused their suffering. Later on, Presto's lead attorney makes the same argument in court. The complaint, he says, is a case of mistaken identity. What do you think about this argument? Where do you believe a multinational corporation's legal responsibility should end? Should US courts be empowered to hold US companies like Presto liable for the abusive and/or illegal behavior of their contracting partners overseas? Should liability be limited to what the corporation actually knows? Should the law require corporations like Presto to take active measures to monitor and correct the abusive behavior of their suppliers, or should monitoring remain a voluntary matter?

8. After the extraordinary efforts of Josh, Madison, and Lewis, after impassioned argument by the lawyers, and after a great deal of soul-searching by Judge Chandler, the judge throws out the lawsuit on points of procedure so arcane that the plaintiffs believe the only explanation is bias. How did you feel when the judge announced the dismissal? After reading the arguments of counsel, did you expect him to permit the lawsuit to proceed? If you were in Judge Chandler's shoes, facing a decision in which the law you had sworn to serve directly conflicted with the demands of your conscience, what would you do?

9. Critical to Cameron's plan to force Presto's hand is a massive, multi-billion-dollar stock purchase by Stephen Carroll. Without Carroll's money and vote of confidence in the market, Cameron knows that Vance and the board will never agree to undertake serious reforms to Presto's business model. In the last decade, the world has witnessed firsthand the dangers that high finance can pose to the global economy. We have also seen, as never before, the profound wealth disparity between people like Carroll and the rest of humanity. What does Carroll's role in reforming Presto say, if anything, about the morality of wealth and power? Do you think billionaires like Carroll and activist funds like Social Capital

should take a leading role in reforming business and making economic outcomes more humane? Or do you think that role should be left to government (or the market itself)?

10. Cameron and Josh are complex individuals. In one sense, they are both idealists, but they are not averse to making pragmatic concessions that will hurt people they care about. In approaching Josh, Cameron betrays his best friend, Vance, his company, the board and shareholders to whom he is responsible, and, ultimately, Josh and the plaintiffs. Yet his goal is laudable. He wants to give Presto a conscience. Josh, meanwhile, continues to fund Maria's non-profit in Brazil, keeping the gifts and the ongoing relationship hidden from Madison, all because he doesn't want Maria's girls to end up on the street. What do these concessions say about the challenge of maintaining and advancing one's ideals in a complex world? In the final analysis, do you think Cameron or Josh is the better man?

11. The title of the novel comes from the last entry in Cornelius's journal, which Ben reads in the final scene. In that entry, Cornelius reflects on the moral paradox at the heart of the US economy in the 1860s, an economy built upon, and fueled by, the labor of slaves. Did his reflections in the journal—or the larger arc of the story itself—make you think differently about the ethical assumptions that lie beneath our own global economy? Do you think the exploitation of the poor by those of greater means is endemic in human society, or is it possible to achieve a more equitable system? After reading the novel, what actors do you believe are in the best position to effect the greatest change? Companies? Investors? Governments? Or does the buck ultimately stop with consumers like you and me?