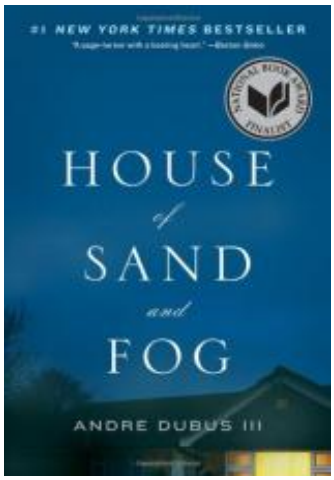
House of Sand and Fog

by Andre Dubus III



About the Book

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Andre Dubus III's **House of Sand and Fog**, a uniquely American tragedy of taut suspense and profound emotional impact.

Colonel Massoud Amir Behrani was once a powerful and respected officer in the Shah of Iran's air force. Having fled the country with his family, he works by day spearing trash on California highways and by night as a clerk in a convenience store while deceiving his family into believing that he has a loftier job. Now, willing to risk the modest remainder of his fortune to restore his family's dignity, he buys a small house at a county auction, planning to sell it again for three or four times what he paid. But the house has been auctioned because of a bureaucratic error, and Behrani's fragile plans are jeopardized when Kathy Nicolo, the owner of the house, begins to protest the sale. A recovering alcoholic and addict, Kathy is desperate to regain her only tie to stability--her home. In doing so, she enlists the help of Deputy Sheriff Lester Burdon, a married man who has fallen precipitously in love with her. As Kathy and Lester become obsessed with seeking justice by whatever means possible, the three characters converge on an explosive collision course. Combining unadorned realism with profound empathy,**House of Sand and Fog** is a devastating exploration of the American Dream gone awry.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you sympathize more with Kathy Nicolo or with Colonel Behrani in part one of the novel? How does Dubus's use of alternating first-person narratives affect your response to, and involvement with, the characters?

2. The contested ownership of the house on Bisgrove Street is the fulcrum of the novel's plot. Who, in your opinion, owns the house once Behrani has paid cash for it? What would be a fair solution to the conflict?

3. Early in the novel Behrani buys himself a hat, which he says gives him "the appearance of a man with a sense of humor about living, a man who is capable to live life for the living of it" [p. 28]. Why is this a poignant thing for Behrani to wish for himself? Does he in fact take life too seriously?

4. What does Kathy's response to Nick's desertion reveal about her character? Why does Lester fall in love with Kathy? Is he better for her than Nick was?

5. Lester tells Kathy that he had wanted to become a teacher, but plans changed when Carol became pregnant. Is Lester's job in law enforcement a poor fit for him? Why did he once plant evidence in a domestic violence case?

6. Who, of the three main characters, is most complex? Who is most straightforward?

7. Where does the hostility between Lester and Behrani spring from? How do their memories--Lester's of his teenage girlfriend and her brother, Behrani's of his murdered cousin, Jasmeen--function to reveal the deep emotions that motivate action in this novel?

8. At what point do Kathy's and Lester's actions depart from the path of a simple desire for justice and move into something else? Why can neither of them seem to act rationally? Does Behrani act rationally?

9. Does Lester drink to break free of a sense of deadness, or to anesthetize himself? Why does he risk his family life as well as his professional life for his involvement with Kathy? Is he attempting to reinvigorate his life, or is he unconsciously seeking to destroy himself?

10. Note the epigraph to the novel, from "The Balcony" by Octavio Paz: "Beyond myself/ somewhere/ I wait for my arrival." How does it apply to the problems of self and alienation in each of the three main characters? Who has the clearest sense of his or her identity? What does it mean to have a clear sense of self?

11. Describing the success of her recovery program, Kathy says, "I had already stopped wanting what I'd been craving off and on since I was fifteen, for Death to come take me the way the wind does a dried leaf out on its limb" [p. 46]. How does the novel affect your response to the social and psychological issues of addiction, depression, and suicide? Do you find yourself being understanding or judgmental of Kathy as the stress of the conflict increases? Is she actually more of a survivor than she thinks she is?

12. Is Behrani's wife, Nadereh, an admirable character? Does her feminine role in a very traditional marriage reduce her importance as an actor in this drama? Does she have qualities that are missing in Behrani, Kathy, and Lester?

13. Behrani tells his son, "Remember what I've told you of so many Americans: they are not disciplined and have not the courage to take responsibility for their actions. If these people paid to us the fair price we are asking, we could leave and she could return. It is that simple. But they are like little chidren, son. They want things only their way" [p. 172]. How accurate is his perception of Americans? How well does it apply to Kathy and Lester?

14. How does **House of Sand and Fog** highlight the conflict between downwardly mobile Americans and upwardly mobile recent immigrants? What role does racism play in the reaction of Americans and foreigners to each other?

15. Why has Kathy avoided telling her mother and brother the truth about her situation? Does their meeting at the end of

the novel resolve any of Kathy's difficult feelings about her place in the family?

16. Should Behrani be held responsible, on some level, for the crimes and excesses of the Shah's regime? Is he responsible for Esmail's fate?

17. Why does Behrani put on his military uniform at the climax of the novel?

18. What do you find most disturbing about the novel's denouement? If you find yourself imagining an alternate ending, what would that ending be?

Author Bio

Andre Dubus III is the author of GHOST DOGS, SUCH KINDNESS, GONE SO LONG, DIRTY LOVE, THE GARDEN OF LAST DAYS, HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG (a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, Oprah?s Book Club pick, and finalist for the National Book Award), and TOWNIE. His work has been recognized with an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Magazine Award, and two Pushcart Prizes. He lives with his family in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

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