

# DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

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*O My America!*

by

Johanna Kaplan

(Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1980)

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### **Author:**

Johanna Kaplan's previous book, her collection of stories, *Other People's Lives*, was nominated for the National Book Award in 1976 and won that year's Jewish Book Award. She has also received the Edward Lewis Wallant Book Award. Her short stories have appeared in *Commentary* and *Harper's* magazine. [From the book jacket]

### **Summary:**

A provocatively and aggressively charming social critic, Ezra Slavin quotes De Tocqueville, Marx, and the rabbinic Ethics of the Fathers with equal measure. When he dies, his first daughter, Merry- product of the first of many marriages and affairs- must make sense of her father's life.

Skipping back and forth in time- from the 1940s when Merry's mother, Pearl, a Polish immigrant socialist drowned Ezra "in diapers and Palestinians" to the 1960s, when he talked politics with upper West Side psychoanalysts- Kaplan creates an colorful and cacophonous portrait of a man and his milieu. The novel brims with capacious with and intelligence: "Ez, with that first-generation disease, had believed himself to be self-generated," Kaplan writes. "He had put all his money on an idea of America he had just gone and made up." [From nextbook.org]

### **Questions:**

1. How is the book structured? Does the author use any narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect your reading of the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
2. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read his or her favorite passage out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) How does this particular passage relate to the story as a whole? Does it reveal anything specific about any of the characters or illuminate certain aspects of the story?
3. Discuss the mystery aspect of the plotline. How effective is the author's use of plot twists and red herrings? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened, or did the author keep you guessing until the end of the story? Did you find that the novel held everyone's interest throughout the story, or were there times when it failed to totally engross members of the group?

4. How important is the setting to the story? If applicable, discuss the time period in which the book is set. Does the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story?
5. What is the most important part of a mystery or thriller to each member of the group—characterization, action, dialogue, or setting? How does this book rate in each of these areas?
6. Is this book part of a series? If so, did your group read the series in order? How has reading the books in order—or not reading them in order—affected your group's enjoyment of the book? How does this book stack up against others in the series?
7. Is the author equally invested in both character and plot? Or did the author put more effort into developing the story than in creating compelling and believable characters? Were the motivations of the characters believable, or did their actions feel like a means to further the plot?
8. Agatha Christie wrote in her autobiography about her dislike of mysteries having a romantic subplot. Do you agree or disagree with her views? Did this book have an element of romance? If so, do you feel the love aspect enhanced or detracted from the story?
9. Would you recommend this work to a non mystery/thriller fan simply on the basis of its literary merit? Would you endorse it purely because of the skillful writing and the well-developed characters? Or do you think the work would strictly appeal to fans of the mystery/thriller genre.
10. Is your group familiar with the author's previous works? If so, did this book live up to or exceed your expectations of the author?
11. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Do you want to read more work by this author?

[Questions from Reading Group Guides

<http://www.readinggroupguides.com/content/index.asp>]