Discussion Questions

Notes from No Man's Land by Eula Biss

Source: Kansas University www.firstyear.ku.edu/commonbook/2012 and Washington University St. Louis www.fyrp.wustl.edu/index.html

1. How does Biss define “no man's land?” How does this concept apply to the book as a whole? Which of the places Biss examines in particular essays qualify as a “no man's land”? Why? Have you ever been in a situation that felt like being in “no man's land”? What about that experience led to your feeling that way? Can “no man's land” become something else?

2. Biss writes, "There is no biological basis for what we call race, meaning that most human variation occurs within individual 'races' rather than between them. Race is a social fiction. But it is also, for now at least, a social fact." (p.17) If race is a social rather than a biological fact, how would you go about describing the author's “race”? What factors influence Biss's creation of identity through the course of the book? In what ways does Biss's understanding of her identity develop and change over time based on her interactions with others?

3. "What it means to be white seems to elude no one as fully as it eludes those of us who are white," writes Biss. (p.31) Where do you see this claim supported in the book? Is she correct? What does Biss suggest it might mean to be white in the U.S.? Is it any easier to know what it means to be nonwhite?

4. How do you think things would have played out differently if the white child in "Relations" was born to a black family instead? Would there have been a difference? Why?

5. In "Land Mines," Biss describes her experiences in New York City classrooms. What effect does her perspective on public education have on the way you view education? How closely do Biss's descriptions of education fit or differ from your own experiences? Does Biss resolve her misgivings about education? What is your reaction to the end of this essay?

6. From the essay "No Man's Land," Biss suggests a "pioneer" as applied today means someone who has moved into an urban neighborhood largely comprised of people of a different race or nationality. What are the effects on these neighborhoods when "pioneers" move in, for businesses, for the original residents, for the "pioneers" themselves?

7. The first and final essays are written in a similar style, with short paragraphs that may seem disconnected at times. What are some of the effects of this way of writing these essays? Why might Biss have put these two essays at the start and finish of the book? How does the style of the first essay connect to its interest in unexpected historical connections? Were you surprised at the connections it makes? Why or why not?

8. In "All Apologies," Biss describes a great many forms of apology, including apologizing without apologizing. (p. 198) What do you think she ultimately might be saying about public and private expressions of regret or requests for forgiveness? And on what subjects?
9. Biss gives no examples for her observation, “Some apologies are unspeakable. Like the one we owe our parents (190).” Right or wrong, what could she possibly mean? How does her use of “the one” (not “the ones”) affect her meaning?

10. In his Afterword to *Notes from No Man’s Land*, Robert Polito observes that Eula Biss writes impressively on such subjects as race, identity, geography, heredity and fate because she writes with “self-skepticism” and a mix of “insistence and quandary.” Do you find these qualities in Biss’s writing? Would you add to or modify Polito’s observation?

11. How might an individual who was not raised in the United States respond to *Notes from No Man’s Land*? Which topics explored in the book might be read and understood differently from the vantage point of another country/culture? Are there topics that would be a complete mystery, or do parallel dynamics of in-groups and out-groups exist in all countries/cultures? If you hail from a different country/culture, what are your thoughts and reactions to this book and its themes?