

## BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

### *El Niño* by Nadia Bozak

1. Early in the novel, Roberto dreams that his mother is hanging the laundry on a line that runs for “a million miles” (p. 17), all the way across the border. What does the dream — and its stark contrast with Roberto’s reality — tell us about the lives of young migrant workers?
2. The book is set in a desert region with many similarities to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, but all the place names — Buzzard/Zopilote, Matchstick County, San Wren, the Río Loco, the Zari Mountains — are invented. Why do you think the author decided to create a fictionalized, re-mapped version of this desert world?
3. Marianne calls the coyote-dogs “ancients.” What kind of creature is Baez? Why do you think the author chose to have a coyog storyteller?
4. Early in the novel, Chávez lifts his T-shirt to show Juan a large tattoo of a skeleton key. Later, Chávez chooses a tattoo of a keyhole for Juan. How would you characterize Chávez’s love for Juan? Over the course of the story, how does that love come to shape Chávez?
5. The novel is told from three points of view — the perspectives of Baez, Honey, and Chávez. Why do you think the author chose to organize the narrative in three distinct but overlapping threads? What effect does this structure have on your experience of the story as a whole?
6. Both Marianne and Johnny-for-Jesus feed and help the boys who cross the border. What is it in their respective backgrounds and personalities that make them want to offer this help? Why do others in the area resent or even directly challenge Marianne and Johnny-for-Jesus for helping the boys?
7. The construction of a massive concrete barrier is a key feature of the landscape in the novel. When it’s finished, the wall will measure “a half-mile high and thirty feet thick” (p. 48) and run for a thousand miles. What kind of changes will the wall mean for the people in the Oro desert?
8. Coyotes appear in multiple ways in the book. The boys who lead other boys across the desert are *coyotes*, Baez is mated by a wild coyote in the desert, and Ocho and Juan chase a coyote in their dune buggy and shoot it dead. What does the image of the coyote represent in the novel?

9. Honey spends a night alone in Marianne's trailer, surrounded by all her mother's belongings. Marianne has edited a poster of a waterfall from "Follow your bliss" to read, "Follow your blisters" (p. 49). Does this joke have a larger meaning in the story? Over the course of the novel, do Marianne and Honey follow their bliss, their blisters, or both?
10. What is "Control"? How did Ocho come to work for these men? Why is he so persistent in his pursuit of Chávez? How does Ocho plan to make even more money in the desert, and what signs do we have that Ocho's plans may not turn out as he hopes?
11. Over the course of the novel, all of the characters are known by multiple names. Marianne is *El Esqueleto*, Old Blue, *vieja*, and Mom. Juan is Curly and Tattoo. At one point, Honey lists off a series of names for Chávez: "Bruno-Jaime-Diego-Juan" (p. 198). What do these multiple names tell us about the different characters and the relationships between them?
12. Honey and Chávez leave Baez where they found her: sitting on Marianne's grave. Why did Marianne go into the desert in the first place? How do you think she would feel about how she meets her end?
13. Marianne quotes Carlos Fuentes's novel *The Old Gringo*, saying, "There is a desert inside all of us." When Honey is sitting in the restaurant at the motel Roma, she realizes that she had a desert inside herself "all along" (p. 275). What does it mean to have a desert inside oneself — what might that desert symbolize? Why is this line important to Marianne and, later, to Honey?
14. The first line of the book is "Baez is going to die today" (p. 1). In the final chapter, Baez finally dies when she barks fiercely for a little girl who is trapped as bounty. Why do you think the author framed the narrative with Baez's death in this way? If Baez's life is the end of an era in the desert, what hints do we have about the changes that are to come?