

Prayers for the Living

by Alan Cheuse

Discussion Questions for Book Groups and Clubs

- 1) The novel opens with a single statement: "It's an old story."
How do you interpret that line?

- 2) *Prayers for the Living* is written predominantly as a monologue by Minnie Bloch. Why do you think the author chose to have Minnie tell the family's story? What do we gain by having her as our narrator, and what might we lose? To what extent do we believe her narration of events or call that narration into doubt?

- 3) What does it mean to have a female character (Minnie) narrating the story of a traditional fallen (and male) hero (Manny)? What complications may arise when a male author writes a female character?

- 4) Rabbi Manny sees his major challenge as choosing between living a blessed life or a successful life. How does this perception affect his actions? Do you believe that it is accurate? Would you frame this dilemma in another way? How?

- 5) As the book moves along you can see that it is, in many ways, a traditional family epic. But in other respects, the narrative isn't conventional at all. What are some of its more surprising, less traditional aspects?

- 6) How do you interpret the bird in Manny's vision? Does the author make it seem like an actual part of reality or a vision or a hallucination of the main character? Can it be both? Or is there some other way to try to understand what it means?

7) The novel incorporates several different modes of communication: ordinary speech, sermon, lyrical exhortation/prayer, and language from the worlds of business and psychology. What is the effect of this blend? What are some especially memorable passages? Why do they stay with you?

8) *Prayers for the Living* covers a long period of time and a large geographical territory that encompasses Russia, the United States, and Latin America. In these respects, how might it resemble other novels you have read? How does it seem distinct?

9) In the book's preface, author Alan Cheuse discloses that he found a kernel of the story, or the seed of the story, in a newspaper article. How do you imagine the story grew from there to what you have now read? How much seems true-to-life, how much invented?

10) The first version of this novel was published in 1986, before the 2008 financial recession and before discussions about sexual assault on college campuses entered mainstream discourse. How might the experience of reading this book today differ from doing so in its original era? How do current events and mores color our interpretations of what we read, and how do books impact our thinking about current events?