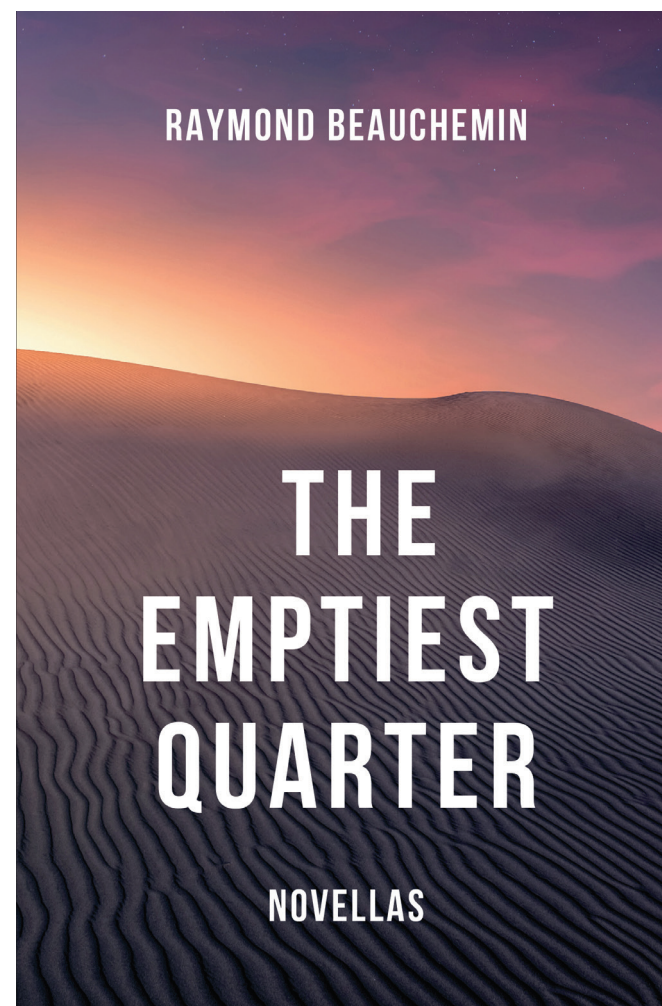


Discussion Questions

1. *The Emptiest Quarter* is a collection of three novellas, each written in a different tone and style. Which was your favourite and why?
2. Which of the novellas do you think would work best as a movie? Who would you cast as the leading actors?
3. Who was your favourite character? With which character did you most identify? Why?
4. The United Arab Emirates is, in world history, a relatively new country with outsized influence. What is at the root of its importance?
5. How familiar were you with the region of the world where *The Emptiest Quarter* takes place? How did the novellas help you understand the politics and life in Abu Dhabi better?
6. Did you think the author accurately captured the religious, cultural and political environment?
7. Did reading this book make you want to visit the United Arab Emirates yourself?
8. One of the themes of *The Emptiest Quarter* is a yearning for peace. What does finding peace look like for the different characters in the three novellas?
9. Identity plays an important role in the novellas. How does it loom over the lives of the main characters? What is its impact on their lives?
10. How are the characters in *The Emptiest Quarter* who are the outsiders treated in the community? What traits do they have in common? What makes them outsiders?
11. Arabic fairy tales don't start with "once upon a time" but instead "kan ya ma kan" which translates to "maybe it was, maybe it wasn't." The first novella, "Tent" begins with "kan ya ma kan." How is "Tent" similar to a fairy tale? How does starting a fairy tale off with "once upon a time," implying that something actually happened, set different expectations for the reader than by starting it off with the more ambiguous "maybe this did happen or maybe it didn't"? What does that difference tell you about the role fairy tales potentially played in the culture?
12. The environment—and particularly sand—plays an important role in *The Emptiest Quarter*. How are the characters affected by their environment? How are you influenced by your environment and how does that compare to the deserts of Abu Dhabi?

FREE BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE



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Sky above, sand below, peace within

The three novellas in *The Emptiest Quarter* find their inspiration in the sands and streets of Abu Dhabi, where author Raymond Beauchemin lived for four years, a time that overlapped with the building of the Louvre and Guggenheim museums and the opening of Sorbonne and NYU campuses, the convulsions of the Arab Spring and the eruption of civil war in Syria. The characters who populate *The Emptiest Quarter* live at both the centre and the fringes of the conflict between preservation and progress, including sheikhs, western oil-and-gas men, burned-out journalists, pearl divers, and Filipina caregivers, all striving to find themselves, to find love, to find balance in ever-shifting sands.

Questions for Raymond Beauchemin

You lived in Abu Dhabi for nearly four years. At what point did you begin to realize this would be a place to grow your fiction?

When I arrived in Abu Dhabi, I was trying to find a publisher for *Everything I Own* and doing the research for another novel, a Zhivago-like one based in Montreal. I was living in a desert country reading and writing about wintry Quebec! Writing about the U.A.E. was not the furthest thing from my mind but it wasn't front of mind either.

That changed though. Like any writer, I kept my eyes and ears open, watched, listened, filed things away mentally and filed things away literally as well, sending myself emails regularly, including stories that were being yanked from publication at the last minute or stories about the Arab Gulf that were running on the wires but we were not picking up locally or in the national and foreign pages. All the while, I was writing essays for a website in the U.S. and an email letter to folks back home, but I knew the material I was collecting was destined for a form in which I could really sit back and explore larger issues.

It wasn't until my family and I had returned to Canada that I began working on the Abu Dhabi stories. But even then, it wasn't right away. I finished my Zhivago/Sauvageau novel, put the work in looking for a publisher, edited my wife's collection of Abu Dhabi short stories, *Brilliant*.

I had needed the distance of space and time, I guess, to understand and make sense of what I had absorbed while living there.

Within the first year of your time as an editor at the National newspaper, you were seeing that some subjects were a bit sensitive to handle. How did you overcome the impulse toward self-censorship when it came to writing The Emptiest Quarter?

When I sat down to write *The Emptiest Quarter*, I wrote what I wrote, which is what I saw and heard, read and heard about. There were some pretty messed-up things happening in the country at the time, accusations of abusive behavior against foreign workers, rape, attempted murder, corporal punishment, forcible confinement, all sorts of depravities. So, in a way, no different than anywhere else in the world. In the West we have this sense of what it's like in Arab countries – an inequality of life, the exploitation and abuse of women, the deplorable living standards for so many non-Arab, non-white foreigners – but mistreatment of “the other” is global.

A lot of that material ended up in a novella that didn't make the final cut. I liked the story, but in the end, looking at the book as a whole and not just separate pieces, the publisher and I realized it didn't fit the whole.

Now there is material in one of the novellas that some early readers thought might come across as insulting to the ruling family, but the argument doesn't hold any water. I'm not sure how one goes about insulting history or historical record. I created a fictional ruling family based on research, no bones to pick, no arguments to make, just an attempt to humanize people who can seem rather distant.

I was even accused of blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad, again, a false charge.

You mention research in regards to the ruling family. How much research went into the three novellas? How do you work with the historical record so that it becomes a seamless part of a fictional narrative?

The first novella, “Identity,” has the feel of a fairy tale. An old man tells the story of his family in a “maybe it happened, maybe it didn't” kind of way. But there are facts and history and research that underpin the story he's telling. Even something as odd as having three men – grandfather, father and son – whose lives span three centuries. I had to make sure that was possible. And of course it is. I actually stole that from John Tyler, the tenth president of the United States, who died in 1862 and yet had a grandson born in 1925 who died in 2020. Strange but true!

The third novella, “Identity,” also required a fair bit of research, mostly to refresh my memory about the Arab Spring and the war in Syria.

But research will stand out as research in a piece of fiction the way lumps do in improperly kneaded dough if the research doesn't feed the narrative or add to character. In “Identity,” for example, the arguments Arab countries were having about whether to join the coalition against Bashir Assad in Syria becomes part of a conversation father and son have, the son being a fighter pilot in the U.A.E. air force dropping bombs on Syria.

The three novellas are different in structure, time and tone. What was underneath, for example, the decision to tell the second novella the way you did? A first person, but whose main focal point is an unidentified “you.”

I needed different forms to tell the stories because the stories themselves were so different and had such different intentions. Emiratis are quite proud of their country's Bedouin roots, proud – despite the fact many live in ginormous villas and work – if they do work – in huge office towers – of the sand and sky and sea that are so much a part of their history. But to hear them talk about it, to see history presented in Abu Dhabi's Heritage Village, is to feel like one is listening to a fairy tale. “Tent,” then, could only be told this way. And it could only be told over a period stretching hundreds of years.

Since the foundation of U.A.E. wealth is oil, the second novella in the collection, “Oil” is also a type of origin story. Those riches led to an incredible amount of change in a very short period of time, especially compared to the passage of years in “Tent.” In my mind, the change was similar to that of a relationship between two people: the “meet-cute,” the growing friendship, the falling in love, a conflict, and then resolution. The best way to tell that type of story, combining a love affair with a person with love for a country, was through the eyes of an old woman remembering her youthful past in the Arab Gulf all the while addressing that certain someone she loved.

Why do you think there is so little fiction that has come out of the United Arab Emirates, even in Arabic?

This is becoming less and less of an issue as more non-Arabs learn about and experience life in the U.A.E. and also as Gulf Arab writers venture beyond poetry into fiction. When I lived in Abu Dhabi, you could count on the fingers of one hand the number of novels or short story collections set there. Among the standouts was Maha Gargash's *The Sand Fish* about a poor young woman's forced marriage to an older man. Rather than criticize a tradition that, although illegal, continues in some fashion, Gargash plays it safe by setting the novel in the 1950s.

In the past dozen or so years, the number of fictions set in the region has grown considerably. Most of the books are genre novels, however, as one would expect since that's what's popular these days. So you've got Sophie Kinsella wannabes setting romantic comedies in Dubai – maybe they are also trying to ride the wave of *Sex and the City* success – or murder mysteries. In both cases, the novels tend to focus on the bling, the superficiality of life in and around skyscrapers.

In terms of literature or upmarket fiction, though, you've got *The Dog* by Joseph O'Neill set in Dubai, and *Temporary People* by Deepak Unnikrishnan and *Brilliant*, both of which are set in Abu Dhabi. Unnikrishnan's stories are fantastical, as life among temporary foreign workers can perhaps seem to them, living and working in a world so unlike the ones where they were born. In *Brilliant*, my wife, Denise Roig, takes on the discrepancies and imbalances more head on.