

***The Bone Cage* – Discussion Starters for Book Clubs**

1. “The Bone Cage” is a reference to the body. The novel for the most part focuses on the bodies of elite athletes, but what other types of bodies are portrayed? What other approaches to the body are featured? What is the novel’s message about people’s relationships to their bodies? What does *The Bone Cage* say about our society’s attitude towards the body? (Think of some of the scenes that stand in stark contrast to the world of elite athletics – e.g. the scene in the yoga studio or the scenes featuring Sadie’s grandmother in the hospital)
2. The novel alternates between the stories of Sadie and Digger, thus asking readers to compare the experiences of these two main characters. How are their attitudes towards their sports similar? Different? How do they each respond to the obstacles they face? What does each of them learn on the journey towards the Olympics? Which of them seems better prepared to face a post-sport future?
3. In what ways does *The Bone Cage* celebrate sport? In what ways is it critical of sporting culture? Do your experiences with high-level sport confirm or conflict with these criticisms? How might sport (or even the Olympics) be re-envisioned to respond to some of these criticisms? (Think, for example, of Lucinda’s bitterness about the single-minded focus on medals or Ben’s devastation when he fails to qualify for the Olympics.)
4. What lessons does Sadie take away from her sport? How might those lessons help with the challenge she faces at the end of the book? Is there any evidence that she is able to take the lessons of sport and apply them to her new challenge?
5. Notice the Browning quotation just before the start of chapter one. Now re-read the scene where Sadie gives Digger a selection of this same poem to take with him to Sydney (230-233). What does the inclusion of this poem add to the novel? What does Sadie’s chosen passage say about what she has learned throughout the course of the novel? Why does she reject her first choice? How do you think Digger will respond to the gift when he has time to read it? Browning’s poem is about a quest, but it is a failed (or misguided) quest. What type of quest is featured in *The Bone Cage*? Is there more than one quest? Which of these quests are successful? Which are failures? How so?
6. Imagine a last chapter to this novel – one that tells readers what happens next. What happens to Sadie? To Digger? Why do you think Abdou chose to end the novel in the way she did? How would your imagined ending change the overall message and emotional impact of the novel?

Questions for Further Consideration:

1) Think about ways in which the novel considers non-athletic bodies. Consider the description of Sadie's dying grandmother's body, the scene in the yoga studio with Sadie's injured body, and the many scenes of Sadie in the care of various health professionals. What is the text's attitude toward the unhealthy body? Does it change from the beginning to the end? Note that our perception of the novel's events and characters is always filtered through the seeing character

(either Digger or Sadie). How are their perceptions of the body similar or different? Notice Digger's preoccupation with weight (when Digger visits Ben at the hospital, for example, his quick description of the man at the front desk focuses on the detail that the man is "fat"). Similarly, Sadie seems fixated on the Lucinda's new flabby skin. What do these observations tell us about the athletes' attitude toward the body?

2) Because the book is so concerned with the body, it makes sense that it would also provide a consideration of the various professionals who work on the body -- doctors, physiotherapists, nurses, prolotherapists, etc. How does this book portray health care professionals? Does it have a message specifically aimed at health care professionals? How might a physiotherapist's view of what a body can or should do differ from the view of an elite athlete (or of an elite athlete's coach)?

3) What is your assessment of the coaches in this novel? Richard C. Crepeau, a columnist for the Sport Literature Association, complains about "adults who ride the carousel of sportsworld pursuing dreams of their own on the backs of children and young adults" (January 2009). Coaches are at the top of the list of those adults who Crepeau chastises, but parents, sport administrators, television executives, and product pitchmen also receive harsh criticism. In *The Bone Cage*, Abdou does hint that both Marcus and Saul have been disappointed in sport but are now invested in ensuring that Sadie and Digger pursue the same dreams that have led to their own disappointments. Are Marcus and Saul good leaders, guides, and role models for Sadie and Digger? Is the text critical of them in anyway? Are there parallels between the two coaches?

4) Notice that many of the novel's male athletes prefer nicknames to their given names. What does this prevalence of nicknames say about male athletes? Anything? Is it true to your real life experience of male athletes (or female athletes)? Is there any significance to the specific nicknames given to these characters? Do nicknames play the same role for each of the characters or are there important differences?

5) *The Bone Cage* has an open-ending. In your opinion, is this effective or not? What message is Abdou able to communicate with an open ending that she may not have gotten across with a closed ending? Or, alternatively, what might have been more productive about a less opening ending? Should Abdou have taken Digger to the Olympics, let him win a medal, and brought him home to continue his relationship with Sadie? Would this ending have been more satisfying to readers? Why? Would such an ending have changed the point of the novel? How so?

6) One athlete in Canadian Literature who seems to cope particularly well with post-sport life is Moonshine Graham from W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe*. In fact, he downplays his experience in baseball and claims that he would have rather missed out on being a ballplayer than missed out on being a doctor. Of baseball, he says "I love the game, but it's only that, a game" (127). Would Digger say that wrestling is "just a game"? If wrestling is not a game, what is it? Does Moonshine Graham's view of baseball as "just a game" contribute to his adjustment to post-sport life? Would Sadie say that a swimming race is "just a game"? Does her perception of sport change from the beginning of the novel to its end?

7) In *The Bone Cage* some of the blame for an athlete's disappointment at the end of an athletic career seems to fall on the media (think of Digger's experience in his TV interview or Lucinda's experience with the commentator at the Olympics). Is this a fair place to assign blame? Could

journalists covering the Olympics approach the subject differently? Does there need to be so much emphasis on medals? Are medals a fair way of measuring success (here: think also of Sadie's initial interview with her lawyer and the attempt to use international rankings as the only way of assessing the value of an athletic career)? If coverage did not focus on medals, what else might it focus on?