

The Bitter Side of Sweet – Discussion Guide

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the story, Amadou “counts the things that matter”. What matters to Amadou at the start of the book? How does this behavior help Amadou feel in control of the situation he and Seydou are in?
2. Amadou and Seydou end up in forced labor at the cacao farm under completely different circumstances than Khadija. In what ways does this inform how each of them behaves at the farm? How do their lives before play into this?
3. Moussa and the bosses use punishment to motivate work and keep the children at the farm in line. Why do you think they vary their tactics depending on who they’re dealing with? How do the punishments create isolation between the children? Why is that beneficial to the bosses?
4. “I was quiet at the farm a lot because quiet can be very scary, and being scary got people to do things if I needed them to,” from Amadou on page 188. Keeping silent and being quiet are recurring themes in this story. How are quiet and silence used by different characters? Do you think it helps or hinders them?
5. For good reason, Amadou believes he can’t trust anyone to help him and Seydou. Yet it’s when he starts trusting people that he’s able to escape the farm with his brother and Khadija. Who else helps our main characters and in what ways? Consider how trusting each other allows them to begin trusting other people.
6. All three of the main characters endure horrific brutalities while at the farm. What are the lasting effects of these experiences? How do they help each other heal and come to terms with those experiences?
7. Amadou feels responsible and guilty for the traumatic things that happened to Khadija and Seydou on the farm. Why would he think these things are his fault? How do Khadija and Seydou respond to his apologies?
8. On page 209 Seydou says, “I can help, you just never let me”. It’s true that Amadou has trouble recognizing how intelligent and helpful Seydou can be until Khadija points it out. Cite examples from the text showing Seydou’s smarts and resourcefulness. Why might Amadou have had difficulty seeing this?
9. After what happens to Khadija, Mrs. Kablan wants leave the country but doing that won’t allow her to finish researching her story. How do Amadou, Khadija, and Seydou help her complete her story? Why is it so important to them that she publishes her story?
10. At the end of the novel Amadou and Seydou choose to go to the fair trade cacao farm Mrs. Kablan told them about. What impact does working there have on each of them? What does this say about fair trade on a larger scale?
11. Over the course of the book we see a change in Amadou’s definition of what matters. What inspires this change?