

- **Book Group Questions for the novel "Gray."**

- Unknowingly, Vera (an ordinary middle-aged white American woman) wants to be a modern-day interpretation of the Greek Goddess Athena. However, unlike Athena, with her crown of flowers and natural ability to judge wisely and take action when necessary, Vera has a big problem. Everything Vera sees around her is GRAY, never even slightly black or white, and Vera struggles to make any judgments with enough confidence to act on them. She surrounds herself with paralyzing clouds of GRAY. Do you think Vera could be using her self-proclaimed insecurity and self-doubt as the reason why she cannot act on things? If Vera were confident with her judgment of a situation, she would then need to do something about it. Is she simply a coward and afraid to speak up, take charge, and change the course of events?
- At the hut, Jane describes herself as a "humble person." Astrid vehemently disagrees and asks Jane: "Why? Because you go around all meek and mild, and you're such a good fucking listener all the time? You think that makes you humble? You hide behind your act. Like you're oh so modest. You're egocentric as hell." A few days later, Vera and Astrid have coffee, and Vera tells Astrid that she considers Astrid to be a humble person because Astrid "put Vera's needs before her own." Do you agree with Vera's definition of a humble person: placing another person's needs before your own? What is your definition of humbleness? Can you think of a time when you or someone you know was humble?
- Vera's definition of humility, placing Warren's needs before her own, becomes the catalyst for her to finally speak up and demand to speak to a doctor and confront Demetri on their way to the airport and ferry. Do you think she sees what unfolds in front of her as crystal clear in these situations, or is she still seeing gray all around her, still doubting what she sees and what she needs to do? Do you think an act of humility is powerful enough to crush one's fear and cowardice?
- Vera reflects on some pleasant memories of Warren, but the relationship with her father was distant. Vera feels "he did the best he could" and had "secrets" and tells Sean that she is upset because he had never told her she was "special" before he died. On her walk with Sally, Vera explains that having secrets is necessary for every intimate relationship. Do you think Vera, the one "with little patience for the illusionist, the bullshitter..." was just fooling herself as she did with believing that the mother she never knew, thought about
- Vera from time to time. Do you think this was a reasonable and necessary delusion for Vera's mental health? Or should she have gone to counseling and faced the truth: her mother never thought about her, and as much as she loved Warren, there was a distance between them that gnawed at her from time to time? Why?
- Warren's dying process over many days is excruciating for Vera (and you, the reader!). Were you shocked by how it was depicted? Have you ever been with a person for their final breath? In retrospect, would you have done anything differently? Would you have wanted something to happen that did not? With the Covid pandemic, people are thinking about their own or a loved one's death for the first time. Have you thought much about your last hours of death: what you want and do not want? Have you done anything about it? Do you know your options?

- After witnessing Martin's final visit with her father, Vera has an epiphany of sorts: she is indeed like Warren, with his particular need to find happiness in life and death through his travelers. Who are your travelers? Do you need only one or two? Many? Why?
- While they are at the hut, Astrid shows her humility when she speaks up for Vera, as Jane laments to the group how Vera had hurt her feelings at the funeral (while Vera still barely copes). Why does this take courage on Astrid's part? Does a trusting friend require Vera's definition of humility? What matters to you in a trusted friend?
- Sean and Vera love each other. Do you think Sean is a good friend for Vera? Why?
- Social intelligence or metis is brought up several times. Vera and Demetri have metis; Unfortunately, Demetri twists it for evil purposes. Can you think of leaders with great metis that have made the world a more terrible place? Is having metis a requirement for being a leader of people?
- Vera was just now, realizing that she would not "go down in the history books as somehow significant, carry out some remarkable feat for the betterment of all mankind." Is it possible that her split-second decision to confront Demetri had anything to do with fulfilling this conscious thought? Was there ever a situation where you wanted to act but instead froze. As we go about our daily lives, do you feel ready to act if a frightening situation presents itself? Do you think always being prepared for anything to happen is a wise way to go about your life? From the news, can you remember a story where you felt a person or people acted courageously? Did you admire that person? What is the most courageous thing you have ever done? There is still time! Haha
- The Greek Goddess Athena is recognized for her wise metis, protectiveness, and courage. The definitive characterization of Athena continues to be from Edith Hamilton's point of view in her book, "Mythology" written in 1942! Unconsciously, Vera wants to be a modern-day interpretation of the Goddess: not the unattractive, masculine, Amazonian stereotype from seventy-five years ago but a beautiful Athena: a warrior, a wise and courageous interventionist whenever necessary. The book's cover represents Vera's unconscious, surreal image of the stunning and confident Athena with her glorious crown of flowers. In the end, do you think ordinary Vera believes herself worthy of being a Goddess? Why? If you were a Goddess, what qualities would you like to have?
- Do you think Vera's loss of libido is unusual? Do you agree with Vera that it was quite possibly the sex (or lack thereof) that broke up her marriage? Did you feel that the marriage counselor did a good job?
- Vera confronts head-on the idea that her loss of libido may have caused her divorce from Max. However, she meets Demetri and suddenly feels sexually attracted to him. Do you think the immense pressure Vera feels to have sex with Max (coming from all sides) contributes to her lack of libido with him? She stubbornly refuses to cave in: "she wasn't going to do what she didn't want to do over and over again." Should she have just tried the sex toys?
- How else could Joan have changed the narration? Do you think the media suggests that you are unusual as a couple if you are not having sex all the time? If yes, do you think this perspective gained from the media can be demeaning to women and troublesome to relationships? How?

- Courageous acts are seldom planned. Do you think Vera regrets speaking up to Demetri about his plan? Why did she speak up and confront him? Was she sure of his plans? Knowing the outcome, do you think she would have done it all over again? Why?
- The book is written in the Free Indirect Style. The narrator and protagonist freely and swiftly transition from thought to voice, with the reader never sure who is speaking. GRAY is not about place; it is about what is going on in the character's mind. Characters are built with composites from memories and experiences, and it is considered challenging for the author. Do you like this style? Why?
- The highly respected literary critic James Wood (author of "How Fiction Works") feels that the Free Indirect Style gives "liveness"(his word) to a character: "...life brought to life with the highest artistry." Wood also feels that the descriptive telling of visual detail has grown dull with mindless overuse. Virginia Woolf thought that chronological storytelling was not only boring but false. What are your thoughts about these viewpoints?
- Tidbits: There are several symbols and associations in the book related to the Goddess Athena. The owl, the color gray (Athena and Vera's eye color, the title of the book), metis, warrior, the mural of Athena that Vera pauses for after climbing the stairs to the rotunda of the Boston MFA, Greece, Athens, the Parthenon, and Vera's dreams. Also, the protagonist Vera Mine is an anagram of the word Minerva, the Roman version of Athena. The word Athena was too difficult to make an anagram from that made any sense!