

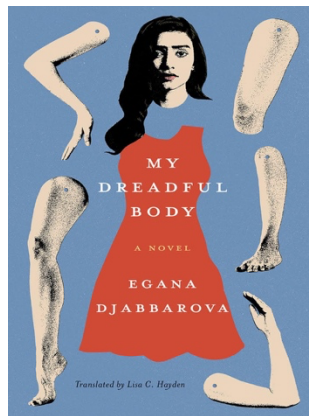


***MY DREADFUL BODY***

By Egana Djabbarova

Translated from the Russian by Lisa C. Hayden

A Reading Group Guide



1. *My Dreadful Body* has a unique structure—each chapter is named for a different body part. How does Djabbarova use this structural conceit to offer readers access to the history of its narrator? How does this structure affect the novel’s relationship to time?
2. Djabbarova’s narrator is part of an Azerbaijani family living in Russia. Discuss how the novel examines the role of the stranger or the outsider. How does shuttling between two languages and two cultures alter the experience of the narrator and her family?
3. Consider the question of inheritance in the novel. What is “passed on” to the narrator by her parents, and how does she make sense of these inheritances, whether they are physical, cultural, or spiritual?
4. At the center of the novel, dictating the narrator’s relationship to her own body, is the debilitating neurological condition which she develops as she comes of age. Consider the novel’s portrayal of chronic pain and illness. How does the narrator’s condition affect her body and her ability to communicate?
5. One of the novel’s major themes is patriarchal violence. Discuss the narrator’s relationship with her father. How does their relationship change as she enters

adolescence? How does her condition affect this relationship, and what sort of “claims” does her father make over her body and her autonomy?

6. Consider the novel’s multigenerational perspective on the role of women in the household and the family. How does the narrator’s life differ from that of her grandmother and her mother? How do expectations about what each of these women is meant to do change over time? How do these expectations stay the same?
7. Language is at the heart of *My Dreadful Body*. How does the narrator balance her Russian education and her family’s Azeri background? What does it mean for her to have been introduced to writing, which will come to be at the heart of her life, in a “second” language? And how does the narrator wrestle with the “loss” of her parents’ language?
8. Consider the role of religion in the novel. How does the weight of Muslim tradition affect the narrator as her condition develops? What does it mean for the narrator that she is unable to fulfill the role of a woman as those around her do? Is this inhibition a setback, or is it ultimately liberating?
9. “Sometimes I think about how symbolic my illness turned out to be . . .” Djabbarova writes in the novel’s penultimate chapter. What does her illness come to symbolize in the novel? How does the progress of her condition reflect her own progress as a woman?
10. Discuss the traditional Azeri lullaby at the end of the novel. Why do you think Djabbarova chose to end the novel this way? How does the poem relate to the novel’s themes of motherhood and girlhood? What does it tell us about how the narrator has come of age in the book as a whole?

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