Discussion and reflection questions for *The Submission* by Amy Waldman

**Transition to college**
What influences each of the characters to behave the way that they do? Family, group membership, culture, geography, media, leaders, role models, faith, and peers all influence the characters in the book. Who or what currently influences you the most? Who or what will influence you when you get to Ohio State?

Many of the characters portrayed in the novel—Mo, Paul, and Alyssa—achieve high levels of career success. Do some of the career choices that they make come into conflict with their own personal values? How do you envision your own career goals? How do you anticipate that your own career path will connect to your own personal values?

Many of the characters in *The Submission* face adversity. How do you handle when something wrong happens in your own life? What is a difficulty you may encounter in your first year? What skills have you used in the past to cope and how could they apply to your first year of college?

How does Claire’s sense of self change when Jack re-appears in her life? How do you anticipate negotiating new relationships in college with friendships from home?

In *The Submission* we see a number of characters who are successful in their respected careers at the cost of various sacrifices. How will you define success for yourself in college? What are you willing to do or sacrifice to achieve that success?

Throughout the novel we see Mo struggling with his identity as an American and as a Muslim. Has there ever been a time when you struggled with one or more identities (e.g., religion, race, sexuality, culture, gender, socioeconomic status)? What are some resources you can utilize on campus as you explore your identity?

We see strong expectations from Asma’s family for her to return back to Bangladesh—expectations that are at odds with her own desires. What expectations does your family have for you as you start at Ohio State? How will you negotiate the expectations of your family with your personal goals and expectations?

**Identity and diversity**
Life is often about understanding, negotiating and coming together with others. Where do we see compromise occur in the book?

A public uproar erupted in 2010 when Park51, a community center housing a mosque, was proposed for construction two blocks from Ground Zero. What does this conflict, and the fictional conflicts described in *The Submission*, suggest about how 9/11 has influenced perceptions about the Islamic faith?

The novel is filled with misconceptions about faith, primarily the Islamic faith, and what happens when people act on stereotypes. At Ohio State, how will you negotiate meeting, interacting and living with people who are different than you? What did you learn from this novel that you can apply to your first year?

What does it mean for Mo to be a secular Muslim? What does it mean to belong culturally to a faith but not practice that faith? How do you identify religiously?

How are issues of faith, race, and identity tied together in the book?

How do you go about finding a place where you have a sense of belonging? How does that play into your different identities? What is your identity?

**The memorial selection**
What do you think of the descriptions of the two finalists for the memorial? If you had been asked to serve on the selection committee, what do you think would have been important to consider when choosing this piece of public art? Have you ever submitted a project (like a science project, piece of writing, art work, or other project) to a contest? What was the outcome?

What did you think about The Garden? Which work would you have chosen? How do you think a determination should be made about the “best” memorial entry? Is the identity of the creator of a piece important or should a piece be allowed to stand on its own?

Why is Claire so enamored of The Garden design as opposed to the Void? Why did the other jurors want the Void? What makes this decision so difficult even before the architect’s name is revealed?

During the debate over the designer, two points are argued: First, “History makes its own truths, new truths;” and the counter argument, “Things—ideals—change only if we allow them to” (page 23). Which sentiment do you believe to be more accurate?

How do people work together during the memorial selection? Is the selection committee a well-functioning committee? How do the characters validate/support their opinions for or against The Garden? As the reader, how do you decide whose opinion was right?

**Decision-making**
Asma keeps her opinions about The Memorial to herself through most of the novel. However, at the end of the story, she comes forward publicly to reveal her opinions in the face of much opposition and at great risk to herself. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt moved to speak on a controversial issue—whether in a public setting or in a private sphere? What are some strategies that you use to discuss a complicated topic with others who may not agree with your perspective? What are elements of a “productive” conversation? What really “shuts down” a conversation so that nothing is accomplished?
Many of the characters choose their actions and decisions based on what others will think of them (ex. Sean worries about what his mother will think, Asma about what her neighbors and landlord will say, etc.) How does this type of thinking affect you? How do people determine their own beliefs regardless of what is expected of them? Can you think of a time when you went against others’ expectations? Why did you make that decision or choose that action?

Why does Mo refuse to discuss his beliefs, his reasons for submitting his design, or his personal viewpoints? Is it better in some cases not to insist on your rights? When should your viewpoint be private and when should you make it public?

Mo is under considerable pressure to give the “right” reasons when asked why he entered the memorial competition, but his responses are complex. In college, you’ll be introduced to many concepts that are complicated and don’t result in simplistic “right” answers. What is your reaction to entering an educational environment often defined by ambiguity?

In the text, we see examples of bigotry and hate crimes as characters react to the tragedy of 9/11. What were your reactions to Sean, especially as he struggled with conflicting feelings after pulling Zahira’s scarf? Is bigotry excusable if it’s coming from someone whose loved one was the victim of a horrific crime? What are the limits of a survivor’s rights?

Issues in society
If social media had existed in 2001, what would the reaction to 9/11 have looked like?

As a journalist, author Amy Waldman had special insight into Alyssa’s profession. Because of advancing technology, the events of 9/11, the capture of Bin Laden, the Boston Marathon bombing, and other national events play out in the media in real time. What does the novel have to say about the role of media and the impact of free press in the information age?

The power of language is shown throughout The Submission. Discuss how Claire using the word “we” to refer to families who lost someone in the attack affects the discourse. What issues exist today where “us” vs. “them” language is especially important?

In The Submission we see different characters with different values. Personal rights, fairness, honoring one’s faith, and justice all have different salience and meaning for each character. How can our society make decisions affecting the public sphere while taking into consideration the beliefs of the private sphere?

We see many examples in our culture where we want to know where a product comes from in order to support it. There have been protests against Chris Brown’s music and the restaurant Chick Fil A because consumers didn’t want to support the individual or company values. Does the background of an artist or company matter? Should their work be independent of their personal values?

How do you define citizenship and patriotism? What defines your citizenship? Is it a legal status? Belonging to the majority culture, race or religion? Something else? Who do you picture when you think of an American? How can you be proud of your country while also accepting of the diversity that makes up America?

We refer to the tragedies of the terrorist attacks simply “9/11.” What is an important date in your life?

Mo encounters a taste of celebrity culture once his identity is revealed and can’t access his home or office without encountering reporters. From the Royal Baby to the Kardashians, we see many other examples of celebrities and public figures being constantly followed by reporters. What is the line between public information and privacy for celebrities and public figures?

Do you think what you post on social media sites like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook should be public or private information? How would you feel if your tweet, picture or profile was published in The Lantern tomorrow?

How does reality TV contribute to stereotypes in our society? Consider the shows Jersey Shore, Duck Dynasty, Honey Boo Boo and Buckwild. What groups are portrayed in these shows? Do you think the shows marginalize certain populations?

Literary
Amy Waldman chose to write The Submission from multiple points of view. How does this structure help or hinder the way that you engage with the story? What do you think she accomplishes by telling the story this way?

Were there certain characters with whom you were more able to connect with than others? Which characters did you connect with the most and why?

Why is fiction a powerful way to explore events that shaped our lives? What can a novel do to explore a sensitive topic like 9/11 that non-fiction or testimonials can’t?