

Discussion Questions for *Invisible Cities*

by Italo Calvino

From Maribeth

1. I have no idea why I argued for this book for our book club! While I was in awe of the detail, the feats of creativity, Calvino's wild imagination—I also felt bored and frustrated. But each day as I read a section, I felt by the end of it, as if I were calmer, more accepting of the world—even if I didn't understand it better. It felt like listening to another language, something I had to get used to. ***Might we discuss how we approach texts that seem so off-putting and forbidding? How do we enter them? What strategies did others use for making sense of this odd book?***
2. I often felt as if what I were reading was a description of the writing process—how we can rarely pin down what we want to say; how sometimes in the act of describing, we lose the “essence” of the experience; how whatever we see—someone else will see it differently; how for everything that stays on the page, there are “entire invisible cities” that aren't on the page, but inform it. ***Is this book about the creative process? Is there anything to be gleaned from that?***
3. I looked forward to the italicized conversations between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. ***What purpose did they serve?***

From Judy W.

4. *Invisible Cities* is told in story form from one historic figure to another. Calvino uses beautiful writing and poetic descriptions. It feels like a book to take on your travels or a must take college lecture class. ***But is it a novel?***

From Deborah Baker

5. As I read each section, I couldn't help thinking about the frame story of “Scheherazade” and the “One Thousand and One Nights” in which the title character attempts to avoid the king's punishment by spinning elaborate stories. ***Why did Calvino choose to set up his “novel” in this way? Might he have been commenting on a larger “truth” than merely the descriptions of cities. If so, what?***
6. I found Calvino's writing disorienting and confusing, especially when he mixed genres and historical details. If this piece was meant to be allegorical, considering how difficult it is to follow, ***was Calvino successful? If he didn't intend this to be allegorical, what did he intend?***

7. Despite its elusive nature, *Invisible Cities* follows a tight structure with nine chapters, describing fifty-five cities, all women's names, divided into eleven thematic groups of five each, with conversations between Polo and Khan framing each chapter. ***Does this predictability help to tease out any meaning?***