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Reading and Discussion Guide for *What the Zhang Boys Know*

These questions are suitable for guiding book club or classroom discussion. Your feedback and additional questions are welcome at info@cliffordgarstang.com

1. This book is called a “novel in stories.” What distinguishes the book from a typical novel? How is it different from typical story collections?
2. Before the book begins, Zhang Feng-qi is faced with the tragic death of his wife, and now he must find a way to raise his two young sons and cope with his own grief. How do people generally react when dealing with loss of this magnitude? Is Zhang’s behavior rational? Is it possibly rooted in his culture?
3. Nanking Mansion, the condominium building in which the book takes place, is home to several artists and writers. What role does art play in the book? What are the different ways that characters react to art? What is your own experience with interpretation of art, either created by yourself or others?
4. Like the city itself, the condominium building is home to a diverse cast of characters. How is diversity manifested? What is the significance of that diversity? Which of the stories address diversity explicitly, and in what ways?
5. Besides the fact that all these characters live in the same building, what else connects them?
6. In what ways is the novelist in the story “The Nations of Witness” an outsider? How would you describe his role in the book? In what ways is he likable or unlikable? How does the story relate to the larger story of the novel? What other characters are outsiders?
7. What *do* the Zhang Boys know? Is the title of the book just whimsical? Or does it have some greater significance? In what ways do the boys help tie the stories together?
8. Many of the stories in the book deal in one way or another with strained family relationships. In what way do these relationships inform the overall narrative of the book? Do these conflicts make it easier or more difficult for the reader to relate to the characters?
9. Loss and grief are important elements of the book, but the characters express their grief in many different ways. What are some of the ways grief is shown?
10. The landscape of the city is often drab and uncompromising, but beauty still manages to arise inside and out. In what ways do the characters experience and engage with the natural world?