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Reading and Discussion Guide for *The Shaman of Turtle Valley*

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

1. Did you read the poem “Mountain Shrine” on the page before the title page? The poet refers to a “mountain god” who “descends like a meandering stream.” How is the mountain god manifested in the novel?
2. Ruth practices a form of Appalachian traditional medicine, not unlike Henry’s ancestor Margaret (introduced in the novel’s prologue). Aiken’s wife, Soon-hee, learned traditional Korean shaman practices in her village back home. Why does Ruth reject Soon-hee? What eventually brings them together? How are their practices similar or different?
3. Why does Aiken think that Soon-hee will be comfortable on the family farm in Turtle Valley? Is she?
4. What are some of the things that Korea and Virginia have in common and why does the novel juxtapose them the way it does?
5. As a way to support himself and his son, Aiken begins to build birdhouses. Why birdhouses?
6. The novel suggests that Aiken has treated both Soon-hee and Kelly badly. Can they forgive him? Should they?
7. Tammy and Jake try to manipulate Ruth and Soon-hee into helping them. What is their motivation? Why do Ruth and Soon-hee cooperate?
8. At least in the eyes of Aiken’s mother and wife, supernatural forces are at work in the novel, although Aiken seems to be unaware of them. What is some of the evidence for the supernatural and who else in the novel seems most open to the idea.
9. The novel is focused on Aiken and his son, Henry, but includes the voices of Aiken’s mother, wife, cousin, and former girlfriend. What do these other voices contribute to the narrative?
10. How does Aiken’s character change over the course of the novel, and what’s next for him?