

## UNION ATLANTIC by Adam Haslett

### *Discussion Questions*

1. The opening chapter puts Doug Fanning at the center of a real event in July 1988: the U.S. Navy's shooting down of an Iranian passenger jet, killing all 290 people aboard. Why might Haslett have chosen to give his protagonist this particular backstory? How is Doug's past navy career related to his present one in finance, and how is the historical moment of 1988 related to America's later involvements in Iraq (p. 286–87)?
2. The plot's central conflict results when an ostentatious mansion is built in a wealthy Boston suburb next to an old colonial house. Charlotte Graves's house is "the physical form her opinion of the world had come to take" (p. 196–97). What does Doug's house express about his opinion of the world (pp. 114–16)?
3. Charlotte's dogs speak to her in the voices of Cotton Mather, the Puritan preacher, and Malcolm X, the black activist. Why might these two outspoken figures be chosen as Charlotte's constant companions?
4. What are the emotions that motivate Doug Fanning? What traits are lacking in his character? To what degree is Doug's present character rooted in his family history, as described on pages 46–51 and elsewhere?
5. Several of the novel's major characters—Nate, Henry, Evelyn—have recently lost someone close to them; Charlotte has been mourning her lover Eric for years. Why does the emotion of loss play such a powerful role in this story?
6. Charlotte, an idealist who does not seem well equipped for the world that surrounds her, has been fired from her job as a history teacher. Do you find her admirable? Or does she come across as an irrelevant crank, a person out of touch with reality? What does it mean that her sense of time is "porous" (pp. 165, 325)?
7. Doug watches as "workers clicked away at their screens . . . until they no longer noticed the bargain struck between meaningless days and whatever private comforts they'd found to convince themselves the meaninglessness was worth it. But it was different if those workers were your muscles and tendons and by your will you directed their exertion, regulating the blood of cash. Then you weren't an object of the machine. You were something different: an artist of the consequential world. A shaper of fact. Not the kind of author Sabrina wanted to be—some precious observer of effete emotion—but

the master of conditions others merely suffered" (p. 191). What does this passage say about Doug, and about power as it is expressed in the workplace?

8. When Charlotte states her reason for refusing to move and for her legal suit against Doug, Henry admits to himself that she is "close . . . to the height of her powers" (p. 203). Do you agree that Charlotte needs to take a stand against "what's going on in this country" (p. 202–203)? Does the novel suggest that it would be better if more Americans felt as passionate about their principles as Charlotte does?
9. The Fourth of July party given by the Hollands gathers together most of the characters in the novel, including Nate and his friends. What is the image of American wealth that emerges here, and what is most effectively satirical in the way Haslett has constructed the event (pp. 221–59)?
10. Evelyn Jones thinks of Henry Graves as "an old-schooler," "a man who sounded as if he meant what he said" (p. 223). He believes in the meaning of words, in the public trust. On a moral spectrum, what is his position in the novel? Does the prosecution of Doug Fanning imply that the interests of the public trust are still being served? Or is the social vision of the novel a pessimistic one?
11. How does Nate explain to himself the meaning of his desire for Doug Fanning, and the fact that he is willing to betray Charlotte for him (p. 265)?
12. The monetary system, Henry says to Evelyn Jones, is "all anchored to nothing but trust. Cooperation. You could even say faith, which sometimes I do, though it's certainly of an earthly kind" (p. 278). What is Evelyn Jones's role in this system of trust, cooperation, and faith? How does she overcome the temptation to betray it? How is her brother's death connected to her decision to tell Henry Graves about the cover-up at Union Atlantic (pp. 279–80)?
13. Haslett does an extraordinary job of showing how the monetary system works, and how a once local bank like Union Atlantic can become a conglomeration of dangerously unstable financial "products." What do you find most illuminating about the novel's focus on money and banking?
14. Doug's mother and Nate's mother are both single parents. Why does Doug decide to go and visit his mother? How are Doug and Nate similar to each other, and why might Haslett have chosen to show their situations as parallel?
15. What do you think of Charlotte's relationship with Nate? She asks him, "Can you trust the pulse of life without becoming Mr. Fanning? Because he is the future. . . . His kind of rapaciousness, it doesn't end. It just bides its time" (p. 263). Is Charlotte right about Doug, given Doug's treatment of Nate? Does the end of the novel, with Doug in Iraq, confirm Charlotte's opinion?
16. Charlotte sets fire to her house when she loses her case against Doug and realizes that she is also losing her mind. Why is it significant that she starts the fire by pouring

gasoline on her books and sits to watch the flames engulf her bookcases (pp. 326–27)?  
What does the scene suggest about the American culture that Charlotte represents?

17. Reviewer Ron Charles wrote that Adam Haslett “may be our F. Scott Fitzgerald, an author capable of memorializing our crash in all its personal cost and lurid beauty” (*The Washington Post*, February 10, 2010). What is most effective, for you, about the way Haslett has conveyed what it’s like to live in our economically and ethically troubled times?