

This reading group guide for **The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds** includes discussion questions and ideas for enhancing your book group/club. We hope these suggestions will provide interesting angles of conversation and enrich your enjoyment of the book.

## Introduction

In this compelling debut novel, author Selina Siak Chin Yoke draws the reader in to the world of the book's heroine as she journeys through life. Along the way she meets a memorable cast of characters. The protagonist, Chye Hoon, is herself strong and flawed but lovable, and inspiring in the inimitable way she overcomes cultural limitations, male dominance and adversity.

A warmly human story, **The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds** (Book #1 in the Malayan Series) takes on complex themes – identity, cultural change, tradition versus modernity and inter-generational conflict – while remaining accessible to the reader. Its rich descriptions of food, family and friendship have already gained it accolades from fans, many of whom have compared it to Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* and Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*.

## Discussion Questions

1. Have you read other novels set in Asia? In what way does **The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds** differ from other novels for you?

2. What did you like most about Chye Hoon and what did you like least?

3. A unique aspect of this novel is the way in which the author has chosen to change word order in parts of the dialogue. Did her use of colloquial dialogue help situate you more profoundly in Chye Hoon's world or did you find the dialogue jarring? Discuss.

4. What are the lessons you took away from this book?

5. *“My friend, you wrong before that time,” I said. ‘I no hate anyone – white skins people too, like us. But they put on airs here.’*

*Siew Lan muttered a protest, which I ignored. ‘Yes, I tell you! They look at me, they not really look – like I not there at all. Like I just thin air in front of them, invisible.’”*

The conversation above, between Chye Hoon and her best friend Siew Lan, takes place shortly before the latter's marriage to Stuart McPherson. Have you ever felt invisible in your own life? Conversely, have you had feelings of condescension towards members of the local population while travelling through non-Western countries? How do you think they felt about you?

6. Discuss the similarities and differences between Siew Lan and Chye Hoon. To what extent do you think Siew Lan was able to influence her friend?

7. Chye Hoon's struggle to adapt to creeping Westernisation is epitomised by her suspicion of Western medicine and hospitals, especially where childbirth is concerned:

*"In any case, babies were different: I could see no reason for not having them in the comfort of one's own home. I had once had the misfortune of stepping into a hospital when I visited a sick Nyonya who was one of my customers, and I couldn't imagine the indignity of lying in such a large room among strangers, being barked at by a doctor, a man, who told you to push . . . pu-u-sh . . . without ever conceivably knowing what your pain must feel like."*

Do you think her views have any validity?

8. What, if anything, in this novel surprised you?

9. Chye Hoon worked hard to feed, clothe and house her children but she failed to mould their characters. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

10. The relationship between Chye Hoon and her eldest son, Weng Yu, forms a central focus in the story. Discuss her reaction when she learns of his attachment to a white woman, Helen, in the context of what you know about the world in the 1920s. What would you have done in Chye Hoon's shoes?

11. By the end of this book, do you believe that her eldest son, Weng Yu, has become a reformed man?

*12. "A world without Nyonyas or Babas? I couldn't imagine, though I knew what Siew Lan meant. The world was changing; life moved quickly, and people rushed more than they did when I had been a child in Songkhla. I didn't like how we had less time for one another, how we kept to ourselves instead of reaching out as our ancestors had done."*

The above passage represents Chye Hoon's thoughts in the early twentieth century, but part of it could have been said today. Can you find parallels in your own life to the ways you have had to accommodate cultural change?

13. Which were your favourite characters in this novel and which did you like least? Why?

14. What were your thoughts when you first heard the title of this book, **The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds**? Do you think this is a good title?

15. To whom would you recommend **The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds** and why?

## Enhance Your Book Group/Club

1. Consider reading the second book in the Malayan Series, **When the Future Comes Too Soon**, and discussing it in your group.
2. Choose any subject(s) mentioned in this novel that you are curious about – the temple in the caves, betel-nut chewing, even the midwifery techniques – and, together with your group, gather as much information about the topic as possible and discuss with pictures. Read through the author's blog-posts to see if anything has been posted on the subject. Also check the Chye Hoon's World page on her website.
3. Most of the characters in this novel have Chinese names. To understand the structure of a Chinese name, read the author's blog-post, [What's in a Chinese Name?](#) Ask your Chinese friends what their Chinese names are and their meaning. If your Chinese friends have siblings, find out the Chinese names of their siblings too as well as their meaning.
4. Either (a) spend an afternoon with your group trying to make one of the *kueh* described in this book (check the author's website for suggested recipes) or (b) hold a book group meal in a Malaysian restaurant or (c) do both!
5. Connect with Selina Siak Chin Yoke on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or her [website](#) and invite her to join your book club discussion of **The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds**, either in person or virtually – she would be honoured to participate if her schedule permits. Even if she cannot join you, send her any questions you may have and she will do her best to provide answers. [Follow her on Amazon](#) to receive updates on upcoming the books in the Malayan Series!