

## FOR DISCUSSION

*Meals from Mars* is a complicated story, touching on tender issues of race, class, privilege, personal pain, and systemic cultural challenges. Please use the following questions to guide your conversation about these difficult issues.

1. The novel opens in the middle of the story, with Malik and Jim crashed at the side of the road, surrounded by police. What was your first impression of Jim? Of Malik?
2. Jim and Mary Beth are very generous in buying groceries for Malik's family. But they're not enthusiastic about this act of kindness. Can you identify with their frustration at the beginning of the story? Why or why not?
3. Jim is proud that his church provides groceries for Malik's family. But Malik challenges him on it. Who's right, do you think? Why?

4. Malik is particularly annoyed by two things associated with the groceries from Mars Chapel: selfies and hummus. Why was he so put off by those things? What might the church have done differently?
5. What responsibility, if any, does Mars Chapel (Jim's church) have to provide for the family of Wilma Thompson (Malik's grandmother)? Was the church living up to its responsibility? Why or why not?
6. What should Malik have done when he felt threatened at the convenience store? What would you have done?
7. What should Jim have done when Malik jumped in his car? What would you have done?
8. Do you know of anyone who's had an experience like Uncle Keith's, when he was pulled over by the police? How was that person affected by the experience?
9. Do you know of anyone who's had an experience like Jim's friend Sam, when he was mugged while fixing power lines in Edgewood? How was that person affected by the experience?
10. Think about your own community. Where do you observe racial divides like the ones between Edgewood and Stone Brook? What perpetuates the divide? What could be done to heal whatever racial divide exists?
11. What needs to happen first? Why?
12. Malik argues that much of Jim's success in life has something to do with an inherent *privilege*—the system was set up to support Jim, even as it was

- rigged against Malik. Does Malik's argument ring true for you? Why or why not?
13. Jim argues that "choices have consequences"—that most people's troubles are the result of their own bad decisions. Does his argument ring true for you? Why or why not?
  14. Whom did you tend to find yourself agreeing with more—Jim or Malik? Why?
  15. Whom did you identify with more—Wilma (Malik's grandmother) or Keith (Malik's uncle)? Why?
  16. What did you hear from Malik or Jim that was most uncomfortable for you? What made it uncomfortable?
  17. Mars Chapel looms in the background of *Meals from Mars*, and throughout the story there are little allusions to prayer. Where is God in this story? What role does faith have to play in difficult social issues like those in *Meals from Mars*?
  18. The novel opens with Malik and Jim surrounded by police. Were you surprised by how that scene was resolved toward the end of the novel? Why or why not?
  19. What do you think Jim was thinking as he stared at Malik in his hospital room at the end of the novel? What do you think Malik was thinking?
  20. Imagine an ending for this story. What happens to Malik? To Jim? What happens to their relationship? Why do you think that's how the story ends?