



UMAMI

Laia Jufresa, translated from the Spanish by Sophie Hughes

Deep in the heart of Mexico City, where five houses cluster around a sun-drenched courtyard, lives Ana, a precocious twelve-year-old still coming to terms with the mysterious death of her little sister years earlier. Using five voices to tell the singular story of life in an inner-city mews, *Umami* is a quietly devastating novel of missed encounters, missed opportunities, missed people, and those who are left behind. Compassionate, surprising, funny and inventive, it deftly unpicks their stories to offer a darkly comic portrait of contemporary Mexico, as whimsical as it is heart-wrenching. The questions below are designed to enhance your discussion of *Umami*.

Questions for Discussion

1. *Book Riot* comments that the fact *Umami* 'is told through multiple points of view' allows for 'the exploration of many kinds of grief'. What other effects might the book's multiple narrators have? How might the narrative have been different if it were told from just one point of view?
2. There is no doubt that *Umami* presents an enchanting portrait of life in contemporary Mexico, but to what extent does this setting shape the way in which its more universal themes – mourning, grief, loss, healing – are portrayed?
3. Jufresa deftly weaves together the disparate lives of a number of individuals within *Umami*, but it is only later in the story that this really happens. What effect, if any, does the delay in bringing the characters' stories together have?
4. To what extent does the lightness and humour with which the story is told heighten the sense of tragedy and grief that pervades the novel?
5. A major feature of Marina's character is that she indulges in making up her own words, most often those signifying colour. What does her frequent wordplay reveal about her character?
6. What is the effect of the frequent references to American art (Red Hot Chili Peppers, Smashing Pumpkins, Nina Simone, Tracy Chapman's 'Fast Car') in a novel so wholly Mexican, both in philosophy and setting?

7. *Umami* translates from Japanese as something akin to 'pleasant, savoury taste'. Why, then, does Jufresa choose this as the title of her novel?
8. The book's action takes place in Belldrop Mews, a housing development mapped out like the taste areas of the human tongue, with houses named: 'Salty', 'Sweet', 'Bitter', 'Sour', and 'Umami'. Does the name of each character's house have an effect on their actions?
9. To what extent do you subscribe to the view of Barrie Hardyman in *NPR* that *Umami's* resolution is both 'satisfying and moving'?
10. The book started as writing exercises in English, was written in its entirety in Spanish, and was then translated from the Spanish back into English. Does it feel like a work of translated fiction? If so, why does it? If not, why not?