

Report on the Book Club: July and August 2024

During July and August 2024, the European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, in collaboration with the Interdisciplinary Centre for European Studies (ICES), hosted a thought-provoking book club. This initiative, led by Ms. Tea Hodaj, a PhD student at the European Wasatia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at Europa Universität Flensburg, delved into two profound literary works: “The Sunflower” by Simon Wiesenthal and “Oranges from Jaffa” by Nadine Sayegh. These sessions transcended the usual scope of book discussions, serving as a vital platform for students to confront some of the most challenging themes of our time—morality, identity, memory, and the intricate complexities of historical narratives. The impact was profound, as students not only engaged deeply with the material but also skillfully connected these themes to their own lives and the wider world. The insights gained underscored literature's power as a tool for understanding the human condition and the intricate weave of history.

July Session: “The Sunflower” by Simon Wiesenthal

In July, the book club's exploration of “The Sunflower” provided students with a unique opportunity to confront the harrowing moral dilemmas posed by the Holocaust. Wiesenthal’s narrative, which centers on his encounter with a dying Nazi soldier seeking forgiveness, challenged students to explore the boundaries of moral responsibility and the true essence of forgiveness. The ethical questions raised—such as whether one can forgive on behalf of others, and what forgiveness means in the context of immense suffering—resonated deeply.

The discussion was dynamic and profoundly significant, as students grappled with the tension between personal peace and the broader demands of justice. Some argued that forgiveness could lead to healing, even in the face of unimaginable wrongs, while others felt it was not within their right to forgive on behalf of those who suffered. This debate illuminated the complexities of human emotions in the aftermath of atrocity, with students demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between justice, reconciliation, and the deeply personal nature of forgiveness. Their engagement with “The Sunflower” reflected deep ethical awareness and a capacity to confront uncomfortable truths with both sensitivity and intellectual rigor.

August Session: “Oranges from Jaffa” by Nadine Sayegh

In August, the focus shifted to “Oranges from Jaffa”, a novel that offered a nuanced perspective on the intertwined histories of Palestinian and Israeli families. The symbolic Jaffa orange, representing both prosperity and loss, became a powerful metaphor anchoring the students' discussions on displacement, identity, and the enduring impact of historical conflicts.

The novel's ability to humanize both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resonated strongly with the students, who were moved by its portrayal of shared suffering and the lingering scars of displacement. The discussions delved into how memory and heritage shape identity, with students reflecting on how these forces continue to influence present-day relationships and geopolitical dynamics. The narrative's balanced approach to a deeply divisive issue inspired students to think critically about the potential for reconciliation and the ways in which literature can bridge seemingly insurmountable divides.

Student Interaction and Reflection

Throughout both sessions, students demonstrated an engagement that was both intellectually rigorous and emotionally profound. They approached the texts not just as literary works but as windows into the broader human experience, drawing connections between the themes explored and contemporary global issues. Their willingness to tackle difficult, often uncomfortable topics—such as the ethics of forgiveness in the aftermath of trauma and the long-term effects of displacement—was particularly noteworthy.

The discussions were marked by a high degree of empathy and collaboration, with students actively listening to and learning from each other's perspectives. This collaborative approach not only enriched their understanding of the texts but also fostered a deeper sense of community within the group. Their reflections revealed a maturity beyond their years, as they navigated the complex moral and emotional landscapes presented in “The Sunflower” and “Oranges from Jaffa”.

Conclusion

The book club sessions in July and August were more than academic exercises; they were essential experiences that significantly deepened the students' understanding of complex moral and historical issues. Through their engagement with “The Sunflower” and “Oranges from Jaffa”, the students displayed an impressive capacity for critical thinking, empathy, and ethical reflection. These discussions not only enhanced their appreciation of the texts but also encouraged them to consider the broader implications of the themes explored, particularly in relation to their own lives and the world they inhabit. The insights gained from these sessions will undoubtedly continue to resonate, shaping the students' perspectives and inspiring future discussions that build on this foundation of thoughtful and meaningful interaction.