



## **Discussion Questions**

### ***The Burgess Boys*, by Elizabeth Strout**

1. The author writes that Abdikarim “felt too old to learn English. Without that, he lived with the constancy of incomprehension” (p. 94). Later, Susan says, “When I was in New York, it went through my mind, maybe this is how the Somalians feel” (p. 276). Have you had an experience like Susan or Abdikarim, being new to a place, and how did it affect you? Did your behavior towards others change as a result?
2. On Bob’s first trip to Maine, Susan comments on the selectivity of community support, saying of the time when her husband left: “I was scared to death. I didn’t know if I’d be able to keep this place. Nobody offered to buy me a refrigerator. Nobody offered to buy me a meal” (p. 50). How do we understand her comment?
3. Susan says about the Somalis in her community: “They’re waiting to go home. They don’t want to become part of our country...It hurts my feelings, honestly” (p. 50). Later, Abdikarim reflects: “That people in the park today had pleasant faces was a fact entirely separate from the inner lamentation he lived with every day: He wanted to go home. But people there had lost their senses, and he could not go home” (p. 155). Discuss how these feelings affect individuals’ actions and the ability to build community.
4. Abdikarim’s sister in Somaliland asks him “Why are you still there, Abdi? You’re in more danger than here! No one is throwing pigs’ heads here” (p. 92). At the same time, Abdi overhears a community member say, “I heard women talking in the library. They think there’s an overreaction to this. They said, ‘It’s rude to throw a pig’s head, yes, but that’s all it is’” (p. 93). Discuss the different reactions to the incident, and how individuals’ past experiences, cultural context, and religious beliefs shape those reactions.
5. Discuss Abdikarim’s reflection that the most disturbing thing about the incident was that the police officers responding to the call laughed when they arrived and saw the pig’s head on the rug (p. 91).
6. Gerry O’Hare believed that despite the many horrible things that he had seen as police chief, what he saw online was new – a different level of hatred. “Cowards....You can be anonymous, that’s what’s the trouble with the Internet” (p. 135). What is your experience with online versus in-person expressions, and how should freedom of speech be interpreted in online contexts?
7. Jim says, “The truth is, Bob, they *need* those immigrants. Maine’s been losing its young people...” (p. 128). What common myth does this address, and what other myths or misperceptions does the author address throughout the book?

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For more information on the experiences of immigrants and refugees in Minnesota, please see The Advocates’ report *Moving from Exclusion to Belonging: Immigrant Rights in Minnesota Today* at [www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/moving\\_from\\_exclusion\\_to\\_belonging\\_immigrant\\_rights\\_in\\_minnesota\\_today.html](http://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/moving_from_exclusion_to_belonging_immigrant_rights_in_minnesota_today.html).