To assist the co-facilitators, the Advising and Summer Reading Committee compiled a list of discussion questions. It is suggested that groups first take time to discuss the questions in Section 1 that students were asked to print out and respond to as they were reading the book over the summer. Next, it is recommended that groups choose from the additional discussion questions in Section 2. However, please feel free to develop additional questions with your fellow co-facilitators.

**SECTION 1: General questions to guide reading**

1. How does the shooting of the ‘Baby Madonna’ tie the stories together?
2. For the various characters, what does it mean to be American? Mexican? Mexican American? Did your definitions change after reading this book? If so, how?
3. How do you define the “American Dream”? How do the characters define the “American Dream”? Do these differ? If so, how?
4. In the foreword, the author shares a regrettable childhood interaction around race that sets the stage for the story to follow. Have you experienced or witnessed any similar interactions with people who are different than you are? Are there things you might do differently to change a past interaction if you had a chance? Have you thought about ways in which you will interact with peers at IWU who are different from you?

**SECTION 2: Specific questions to guide group discussions**

1. Echo Park is *not* a fictional setting. It is a real neighborhood of Los Angeles, CA, and is the former home of the author. In what ways does the neighborhood---the only constant presence in each chapter---figure as a “character” in the novel? What are some of the key features of the neighborhood that emerge across these chapters, and how do those features relate to the themes of the book? (It seems that Chapters 6 and 8 are especially important here.)
2. What do you think is the significance of the “Madonnas” in the title? Who are the Madonnas in the narrative, and what is the importance of their connection to faith and/or to 80’s pop culture?
3. Some readers are surprised to discover that the Author’s Note---in which the author describes a formative junior high school interaction much like one that figures in the plot of the book---is part of the fiction. Why do you think the author uses this device to start the book? What purpose or purposes is it supposed to serve? Is it effective?
4. In what ways does current immigration policy help new immigrants? How does it work against them? Consider these same questions for immigrants who have lived here for a long period of time.
5. Do you believe that the experiences of the characters in this novel are representative of real Mexican immigrants? Why or why not?
6. Historically, immigrants have often faced prejudice and marginalization: Irish escaping the Great Potato Famine in the 1840’s were thought to be threatening (in part) because of their Catholicism, and Italians fleeing poverty and strife in the 1870’s were perceived as inferiors that threatened American jobs. What is your perception of Mexican immigrants and their impact on the economy and culture of the United States? What experiences have contributed to the formulation of your perspective?
7. The characters in this book have various occupations such as construction worker, domestic help, bus driver, etc. Do immigrants have genuine opportunities available to them, or are immigrants being taken advantage of? Does the impact of this status vary according to the immigrant’s country of origin?
8. Immigration policy is a topic of much discussion and controversy in the United States. Did reading this book change your perspective on immigration policy? If so, how?

9. How do you define the “American Dream”? How do you think the community members of Echo Park would define it?

10. Many of the characters experience a personal sense of invisibility among the whites for whom they work. For example, Felicia is not allowed to clean a room while her employer is in it, and the white men who choose day laborers seem to see them as interchangeable. Do you think the dismissal by whites is due more to their class status or ethnicity?

11. The women and children gathered together when the shooting takes place are there in homage to Madonna and her music video. Aurora obsessed over Morrissey, and Angie was a fan of Gwen Stefani and No Doubt. How much of a role does American popular culture have in the formation of first-generation immigrant identity? For these characters, does embracing American popular culture come at the expense of their own ethnic culture?

12. The characters in this book have different reactions to the changes within their neighborhood of Echo Park, some acclimate well to the changes and others do not. How do you think you will perceive your hometown after being away at college?

13. How does gentrification impact communities? In the long run, does gentrification result in a positive or negative outcome for the original neighborhood’s inhabitants?

14. Hector slaps Aurora for insisting on calling out his co-workers for making a racist joke that he himself deliberately chooses to ignore and rationalize (pg. 19). What do you think would have happened if Hector regularly protested such behavior? Discuss Aurora’s and Hector’s respective response to the joke in terms of gender and generational identity.

15. Racism is woven throughout this book. What are the reasons behind the characters’ racism? What are the consequences for those who hold racist beliefs and those who are affected by it? (Think about Juan’s mother’s prejudice against his Chinese girlfriend [pg. 95], or Hector’s experience after witnessing Diego’s murder.)

16. The friendship between Duchess and Angie begins to break down when Angie chooses to work in a “white” clothing store (pg. 136) while Duchess works in their neighborhood bank. When the two meet again several years later, Duchess seems to have stagnated and, from Angie’s perspective, lost both her ambition and her charisma. Why do you think Duchess gave up her interest in fashion design?

17. Angie “welcomed these fellow white, affluent (and sometimes openly gay…) strangers” (pg. 147). Angie chose to assimilate into white culture, while Duchess chose to stay within the geographic and cultural parameters of her neighborhood. Discuss whether these different choices are a factor in their respective life circumstances as described at the end of this chapter. What weight, if any, do you assign the author’s choice of the word “fellow” in this particular passage?

18. Skyhorse often closes a chapter with major, dramatic plot points (e.g., Hector’s deportation, the death of Mrs. Calhoun, Freddy Blas’s flight from town on Efren’s bus) which are---confounding some readers’ expectations, and unlike the ‘Baby Madonna’ shooting---never returned to again. Why would the author construct the story in this non-standard way?

19. Eight characters in this novel are each given their own “Point of View” chapter. Which of the remaining characters do you wish had been given a chapter of his or her own, to speak and relate his or her piece of the story in her own voice? Each of those eight characters gets a second chance to tell another piece of the story. Which of the eight would you have liked to hear from again?

20. Each of the eight chapters is written in the form of a first personal narrative, although only one of them (Efren Mendoza’s) has a clear audience and occasion specified in the text. Whom do you imagine the various narrators addressing?