



Koran By Heart Discussion Guide

Director: Greg Barker
Year: 2011
Time: 80 min

You might know this director from:

We Are the Giant (2014)
Manhunt (2013)
Sergio (200)

FILM SUMMARY

Each year during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, a new group of young minds from around the world is selected to participate in Cairo's annual International Holy Koran Competition where they do their best to recite randomly selected passages from the holy text and are judged based on their memory and "tajweed", meaning the proper pronunciation during recitation. For believers, listening to the recitation of the Koran is a transcendent activity, the text itself thought to be the actual words of God revealed to the prophet Muhammad to be passed on to his followers. Yet, to the unknowing observer, the competition, as documented by director Greg Barker in KORAN BY HEART, may come across more as a series of religious musical performances that play out as a narrative commentary on the fragmentation of Islam and the varying global community in which it encompasses.

In its light-hearted depiction of the competition at the film's center, Barker sees children ranging in age from seven to their late teens, often under the differing religious opinions of their parents, devoting nearly their entire existence to the memorization of a religious text, many of whom don't even speak or understand Arabic, the language in which it is presented. As the children fly in to Cairo - from the Maldives, Tajikistan, Senegal and beyond - these relatively sheltered children experience the world in ways they never imagined.

Providing a clear-eyed window into the challenges and issues facing the next generation of Muslims around the world, KORAN BY HEART asks us to observe, through the lens of youthful competition, the Islamic populous for what it is - a complex international religious community that varies greatly in beliefs and ideals.

FILM THEMES

Embracing the competition setup as a narrative network, *KORAN BY HEART* swells with layer after layer of cultural commentary and thematic insight.

THE INCREDIBLE CAPACITY OF THE HUMAN MIND

Depending on the print, the Koran can range from 600 to 700 pages - an incredible amount of information to put to memory. Yet, at as young as seven years of age, the children featured in *KORAN BY HEART* have memorized each word, phrase and verse for random recall, some of whom have done so without having any further knowledge of the Arabic language than the sound of the holy locutions themselves. It's a truly neurologic wonder that the mind can accomplish such incredible cognizance through sheer devotion.

ISLAM AS AN INTERNATIONAL RELIGION OF DIVERGING IDEALS

By structuring *KORAN BY HEART*'s narrative around a trio of children and their families from various corners of the globe, Barker has given us an overarching portrait of Islam that highlights the stark differences of belief, not only from one continent to another, but occasionally within a single household, from fundamentalist beliefs to more progressive approaches. In one startling example, the future of Rifa, the lone young girl in the film, is separately decided by her parents - her father unquestionably resolves to make her a housewife, while her mother states that her daughter will have any future she chooses to pursue. Personal faith is inherently that, singular and unique, despite the umbrella of belief that corrals the faithful together.

TRAVEL AS A CULTURAL AWAKENING

For the young mind, there is nothing that shakes one out of an ignorant state like the brisk eye-opening experience of world travel. Especially in cases such as this, where youth are adventuring away from their seemingly hermetic academic existence into a completely new metropolis in which even the language might be alien. The new perspective on the world is often an enriching, humbling ordeal that sets a lifelong impression. And as evidenced by some of the staunchly judgmental elders in the film, one's youth is the ideal time for tolerant, hopeful impressions to be made.

THE NEED FOR A WELL ROUNDED EDUCATION

As we witness throughout the film the extraordinary capacity of the human mind to absorb and retain information, it becomes increasingly more clear that in order for most of these children to memorize the entire Koran, they've forgone a formal education which would open them up to greater opportunities in life. Case and point: Nabiullah, a 10 year old boy from Tajikistan, has memorized the entire Koran in a foreign tongue, but has no knowledge of how to read or write in his own native language. Blessed with an angelic voice and an incredible mind, the boy still lacks the basic academic skills of most children his own age.

“If the Qur’an is gathered into a single vessel, Allah will never burn it in the Fire.”

Al-Bayhaqi, Islamic scholar

“I think it’s a faith full of contradictions and nuances and the more we understand that, the better. Because, Islam affects America. There are many Muslims in America who are citizens like anybody else and also, if we are involved in that part of the world politically and militarily we’ve got to understand.”

Greg Barker

FILM FACTS:

- KORAN BY HEART documents the International Holy Koran Competition in Cairo which took place during Ramadan 2010, just prior to the start of the Arab Spring and the fall of President Mubarak.
- As stated by director Greg Barker himself from an interview with The Huffington Post, “The biggest challenge (of making the film) was overcoming the skepticism from everyone involved (parents, event organizers, etc), over what our intentions were.”
- Rifdha, a girl from the Maldives, Nabiollah, a boy from Tajikistan, and Djamil, a boy from Senegal were just 3 of 110 competitors of the 2010 International Holy Koran Competition.
- After making KORAN BY HEART, director Greg Barker won a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Special for his next film MANHUNT.
- Current estimates conclude that the number of Muslims in the world hovers around 1.6 billion.
- There are 77,701 words, or 6,236 verses in the Koran, all of which need to be memorized by the participants of the competition.
- Prior to working on KORAN BY HEART, director Greg Barker worked on the long running PBS documentary series, FRONTLINE, producing stories on such topics as the Rwandan genocide and the lasting implications of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.
- Though KORAN BY HEART found its way to a wide audience thanks to HBO, the film originally premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival on the 10th Anniversary of 9/11.
- In 2014, the number of competitors at the International Holy Koran Competition was down from 2010, at 71 Koran reciters and memorizes from 46 different countries.
- It is thought that the more of the Koran one has memorized, the higher level they’ll be placed in the paradise of afterlife.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Give others the chance to be inspired by its story.
2. **Get** to know and understand those who believe in a faith different from your own. Visit a local mosque, temple or church just to witness the goings on in your community and to touch base with people who share your neighborhood.
3. **Check** out some of the online resources that give you an intro to the Arabic language, such as [Tajweed In English](#).
4. **Listen** to others recite the Koran. As non-Muslim Koran scholar Kristina Nelson explains in the film, “When you hear the Koran, you are experiencing a moment of (musically beautiful) revelation. You are not just hearing a religious text.”
5. **Travel!** The best way to learn about and appreciate foreign cultures is to envelop yourself with them!

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Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.