

The Mushroom at the End of the World

Discussion Questions

1. As Ursula Le Guin describes in her endorsement of the book, “Scientists and artists know that the way to handle an immense topic is often through close attention to a small aspect of it, revealing the whole through the part.” Do you think Tsing was successful in using her study of matsutake to take on immense topics such as the global economy, the environment, and more?
2. Tsing explores the theme of precarity in multiple forms through investigating matsutake. What were some different examples of precarity that she describes, and were you convinced by all of them?
3. Tsing explains that the book is a “riot of short chapters,” which “build an open-ended assemblage, not a logical machine” (pg. viii). What did you think of this structure? Do you think it helped to support her argument?
4. Tsing uses the matsutake to explore a wide range of subject areas and areas of knowledge, including social science, natural science, and the humanities. Were there specific parts that interested you more than others? Did they align with your personal interests?
5. How does the concept of freedom mean different things for different people at Open Ticket? What were your thoughts on this section?
6. Tsing meets quite a few different people in her travels. Did you have a favorite person you enjoyed meeting, or thought was particularly interesting?
7. Matsutake hold a special place in Japanese culture, which is why they are such a valuable commodity. Are there any other commodities you can think of that hold a similarly special place in other cultures?
8. Tsing explores how American scientists who study matsutake focus on scalability, whereas Japanese scientists focus on the environmental context in which matsutake thrives. Where do you think this cultural difference in approach originates?
9. Matsutake grow and thrive due to human destruction. Does Tsing’s exploration of this change your perspective on humanity’s relationship to the environment?