Discussion Questions for ***Desert Flower***

**Directions**: These questions are only for our discussion—no need to write your answers, at least not as homework. As you read the excerpt from the memoir this film is based on, keep in mind that I’m leaving out vast swathes of the story. It will be much easier to answer the questions after you’ve seen the film.

1. Many commentators on the book and the film situate the works in the context of other stories about celebrity models, a genre that has inspired much derision among “serious” readers. Yet it’s hard to deny that this story probably wouldn’t have reached a wide audience if it *hadn’t* involved the fashion world. Considering your own reactions, do you think the film manages to balance the two apparently conflicting elements: the glamorous plotline of Dirie’s rags-to-riches rise in the fashion world with the brutal story of her suffering and her crusade to end FGM with? If not, what changes to the film would you recommend to either make it more entertaining or to make it more effectively achieve its goal of giving Dirie’s campaign for social justice a wider audience?

2. Some might argue that Dirie’s escape from the marriage market where her father would have sold her for a few camels to the fashion world where her beautiful body earned top dollar for her “handlers” is not really an “escape” at all, or at least not a difference in her kind, and not really a liberation. One reviewer said: “Yes, Dirie came a long way from being sold off in Somalia but, even in the upper echelons of the modeling profession, her body was her passport to a future. Rather than examine those troubling implications or what might have become of her if she hadn’t been beautiful, the film opts for uplift.” After watching what the film does with this story, what do you think? Does it hold the Western fashion industry up to criticism, as well as the traditional African practices it more openly challenges? Or does it cater to the Western audience’s tendency to objectify and commodify women (especially women of color)? Does it depict the fashion professionals who make Dirie a model as exploitative, or as benefactors, or both? Who else might be seen as exploitative in the film?

3. Although the screenplay is faithful to the story in most essential elements, the filmmaker changes the character of Marilyn (Sally Hawkin’s character) from a London-born woman of African heritage into a white woman and an aspiring dancer. This character is also conflated with a London-based Somali-born woman who takes Waris in when the family she works for goes back to Somalia. The scenes where Waris is reduced to living on the street and eating out of a dumpster until she follows Marilyn home from the department store like a stray puppy never happened. (In the excerpt from the book you will read what really happened at that crucial point in the story.) Why do you think the filmmaker might have decided to make this change? Do you think it is artistically or rhetorically justified?

4. Like Binh and Ling in *The Beautiful* Country, this story’s protagonist is a refugee from poverty and hardship who lives her life in the shadows of a prosperous Western country because she lacks “papers,” contacts, and the language skills that are usually required for success. What does the film seem to be saying about the system’s way of dealing with these people (basically, indentured servants)? In what way does it seem critical of the system or of the people who break its rules?

5. Consider the advice Andrew Lam gives in “Letter to a Young Refugee.” In what ways are his lessons demonstrated in this film? What other advice does the film seem to offer refugees in Dirie’s situation?

6. In the last chapter of her book, “Thoughts of Home,” Waris discusses her complicated feelings about the land she fled as a child. Considering both her words in the memoir and the film’s depiction of her struggle to reconcile the dictates of her culture with the impulses of her individual will, what do you make of this? Is she likely to always suffer from the “restlessness of the soul” that Andrew Lam describes operating in many members of the Vietnamese diaspora? Like Lam, do you think Dirie might feel that, as Lam says, “somewhere between ‘here’ and ‘over there’ a part of me ceased to exist”?

7. Like Mohan and Ponceludon in earlier films, Dirie decided, when she finally had access to personal wealth and status, to devote herself to a cause larger than herself, a task that involved certain risks and sacrifices. Considering what she says in the chapter called “The Ambassador,” what seems to have been Dirie’s motive for this? If this weren’t a true story, do you think you would find it likely that someone with her history would be willing to expose herself to shame and public criticism—maybe even to retaliatory violence—to take on this task? Why or why not?