

Discussion Resources for Memoir **Courtesy of Anchor Books**

Memoirs are perhaps the most commonly read works of nonfiction. And they are undoubtedly some of the most popular choices among reading groups today. Sometimes harrowing and heartbreaking but always enlightening, these are books that lend themselves to great discussion on a variety of topics.

* Many of the most popular memoirs relate the story of the author's experience growing up in a troubled or even tragic family situation--for example Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*. What is most compelling about memoirs as a genre of nonfiction? Are true-life stories potentially more powerful than fictional ones? Why or why not?

* Memoirs and fiction can be quite similar. Consider novels--such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*--that center on characters who tell their own stories in first-person narration. How are the choices a writer makes in writing autobiography different from those made in writing fiction? Do writers themselves into characters, exactly as they would create a character in a work of fiction? How important to the reading experience is the idea that this really happened? How do we know that the memoir writer is telling the truth?

* Consider the structure of the memoir. What decisions has the author made in shaping the story of his life? What is emphasized? What is left out? How is the passage of time presented? What is the relationship between the past and the present of the writer's life, and does the structure of the book depend upon moving between past and present?

* Do you find the writer's voice appealing or unappealing? Which aspects of the writer's character do you identify with most and least? How does your reaction to the writer affect your experience of the book?

* How does the author approach his own story? With a sense of irony, sympathy, distance, comedy, or something else entirely?

* What is the role of fate and what is the role of desire in this life story? Does the author present himself as the main force in shaping life's events? Or is there a strong sense that the author is a victim of circumstances over which he has little control? Do characters in the story come across as active or passive? How much does the central character change over the course of the memoir?

* Many book reviewers and culture commentators claim that in the past several years we have witnessed a "memoir explosion." Why has this genre become so popular with readers and writers alike? What are the benefits and drawbacks of writers sharing an intimate view of their lives with the general public?

* What is the story's impact on you? How does the memoir you have just read change the way you think about your own life story?