

Reading Group Guide

Who Do You Think You Are? by Alyse Myers

For Discussion

1. What is the significance of the book's title, *Who Do You Think You Are?* How does the author answer this question? If asked, how do you think her mother would respond?
2. "Here's how you'll get her back, he told me. I looked at him, not understanding how that diary would help me. Write it down, he said" (page 43). Do you think keeping a journal helped the author work through her anger or just allowed her to keep track of her mother's faults? What purpose do you think journal writing has in our culture?
3. Why do you think the author's parents fought so much? How does Alyse's age and perspective affect our understanding of her parents' relationship? Do you think Alyse is a fair narrator when it comes to describing her parents' relationship or the relationship she has with her mother? Why or why not?
4. At her father's funeral, her mother gave Alyse her father's favorite necklace. Considering the origin of the necklace, what kind of gesture was this? How did this make you feel about Alyse's mother? What does it mean to Alyse?
5. Why do you think no one offered to drive Alyse's family home after her cousin's bar mitzvah? Who or what was responsible for the tension between the families? Did you think it was strange?
6. How do you think Alyse's relationship with her mother ultimately influenced her relationships in general? And later, how did Alyse's husband's relationship with her mother—and her mother's relationship with him—change how Alyse felt about her?
7. What event prompted Alyse to move out of her mother's apartment for good? Do you think the author or her mother was at fault? Explain your answer.
8. "For some reason, the mere mention of the *New York Times* triggered her anger toward me, long after I moved out of her apartment. Sometimes it seemed as if the *Times* was in some way the cause of our problems" (page 155). Why do you think Alyse's job upset her mother so much? Was there any career choice that would not have made her mother feel threatened? If so, which one?
9. Why did Alyse's mother give her the pearl earrings? Was she proud of her daughter or finally becoming comfortable with their relationship? How did the theft of the earrings affect the original gesture?
10. Was her mother deliberately late for Alyse's wedding or did she get lost? What do you think the author believes? After the couple was pronounced man and wife, everyone clapped except her mother. How do you interpret that behavior?

11. How do you feel about the author's lying to her mother about her true medical prognosis? When do you think it is okay to lie to a person to protect her? If ever.
12. "My daughter was going to bring the two of us together. For the first time, we would have something we could share. We were both mothers. And one of us was going to be a good one" (page 182). Discuss the theme of motherhood in this book. In what ways is it shown to be both damaging and healing? In the end, how would you describe the relationship between Alyse and her mother? And, finally, would you call Alyse's mother a bad mother? Explain your answer.
13. "That box would give me the answers to my questions: Who were my parents really? And why did my mother end up with so very little in her life?" (page 4). What answers, if any, did the contents of the box give the author? What did you think was going to be hidden in that box? Do the contents of the box change the way you think about her mother? Why or why not?

A Conversation with Alyse Myers

In writing this memoir, did you make peace with your mother? If she had the chance to write about her side of the story, what do you think the theme of her book would be?

I made peace with my mother after I had my own daughter—it was the first time my mother and I really had something in common. I saw how she was with my daughter and realized she could have been a better mother to me—and probably wanted to be—but that the circumstances and stresses of her life got in her way. As I write toward the end of the book, I wished we could have started all over. But by then it was too late.

I think the theme of her book would be "I did the best I could." My mother was handed a tough life—and for whatever reason she just didn't know how to use her difficulties as an impetus to do better. In many ways, she gave up. On everything. I wish I knew then what I know now.

How long did you work on this memoir? How do you think each of your parents would have reacted to the publication of this book? How would they feel about how they are portrayed?

I've been writing this book in my head since I was sixteen years old. I took a memoir writing class a few years ago to see if what I had in my head would work on paper. I spent a summer during the weekends while my daughter was on a teen tour writing the first hundred pages—and then finished the rest over the next few months.

I would not have been able to write this book if either of my parents were still alive. It would have been seen by each of them as the ultimate betrayal. We were not the kind of family that spoke about our feelings. We were very much a behind-the-closed-door family. In a funny way, I also think the two of them would have been surprised to know that I knew and saw so much. And how it affected me.

You always think you know your parents—but what I learned is that you really don't. You don't know them when you're a child and you don't really know them when you're an adult. I was fortunate to be left with a gift after my mother died—for me, the ultimate treasure chest—that allowed me to see more of who she was.

Your mother always asked you, "Why do you want more?" Why do you think you wanted more out of life?

I was a huge reader as a child—often consuming a book a night (I’m a very fast reader). I also spent a lot of time in the library. As a result, I was a student of other people’s lives and could see there was more out there than what I had growing up in Queens. I knew I didn’t want to have the same life as my mother—and was going to do whatever I could to ensure that not be the case.

Your father gave you a diary to write down your feelings, but your mother threw it away before you left home for good. How were you able to remember all the specifics of your childhood and relationships without the diary? Have you encouraged your own daughter to keep a journal? If so, do you worry that she writes about the differences and disagreements you share?

There are some events that I have relived in my head throughout my life and I can remember them like they were yesterday. The details are as vivid now as they were then. I’ve done my best to present my story as best as I can remember it. I hope I got it more right than not.

My daughter has been writing in a journal since she was in the seventh grade—I love that! I am sure there are things she has written about me that aren’t pleasant—things that I would rather she didn’t remember or commit to paper. That said, she has the right to remember the moments in her life, and I would rather be in them than not—no matter how painful they might be to read years later. I’ve worked hard to have a good relationship with my daughter, and I love her more than she’ll ever know. I especially love her confidence and her independence. When she was born, I promised myself I would do all that I could to have a better relationship with her than I had with my mother. Hopefully, when she’s my age, she’ll remember more of the good than the bad. And know that I did the best I could.

Even though you hated the fact that your parents smoked and that your mother died of lung cancer, did you ever try smoking? Or was not smoking a way to rebel against your mother?

When I was about twelve years old, I stole two cigarettes and a matchbook from my mother’s purse and went into the bathroom when she was at work and my sisters were at a friend’s house. I wanted to see how I looked smoking. I lit the match on the first try and was quite pleased with myself. I took a drag—and as I looked at myself in the mirror, I coughed like crazy and saw that I looked like an idiot. I threw the cigarette, the match, and the second cigarette into the toilet and flushed. I never smoked again.

You used to do the ironing for your mother at night—a peaceful time when it was just the two of you. Have you carried on that ritual with your daughter? What, if anything, does your daughter remember about your mother?

I loved ironing—and was quite good at it! But I really don’t do all that much ironing anymore and haven’t yet taught my daughter how to iron. I’m not sure she wants to learn! My daughter was three years old when my mother died. She tells me she remembers very little about her—save the breathing tube in my mother’s nose when we visited her at her apartment just before she died. And maybe her blue eyes—although she admits she might remember that because of what I’ve told her. As I write in the book, I feel sad that my daughter remembers so little about my mother.

Education was your escape from a poor and difficult family life. What do you do today to inspire others who are dissatisfied with their lives? What advice would you give to those feeling trapped in a dysfunctional family?

I've always found reading to be a great way to retreat from life's stresses and noise. Reading used to take me away from my day-to-day life growing up. I was often lonely—and books were my companions. I learned through books to believe that anything is possible—because it is.

The best advice I can give to anyone who feels trapped in a dysfunctional family is to find something you're passionate about—and focus on it until everything else is blocked out. Also, surround yourself with smart and loving people. If you don't have them at home, you must find them outside in order to stay positive about yourself and the future. I worked hard to create the life I wanted, and I wouldn't give up. I also did my best not to let my mother know how much she bothered me—that was my protection, too.

Your mother used to say, “like father, like daughter.” Now knowing what you do about their relationship, do you still see that comment as criticism, or has it taken on a new meaning? What good qualities do you think you inherited from your mother and father?

It was definitely criticism—my mother grew to detest my father. Knowing more about his relationship with my mother has helped me better understand why she was so angry with him. And she wasn't wrong. I just wish I knew more then. Perhaps inadvertently my mother's experience taught me never to settle—to always want more. I so wanted to have a different kind of life than the one she offered me. In her own way, she forced me to be very independent.

My father loved to be around people and he used writing as an important form of self-expression. I'm grateful that both those traits passed to me. And while he couldn't afford much of what he had or wanted, he did teach me to appreciate good things.

Suppose your mother could ask you today, in a thoughtful and interested tone, “Who do you think you are?” How would you respond to her now as an adult and mother?

I would tell her I'm a loving mother and a loving wife and that I'm successful at the things that really matter: love and relationships. I would tell her that she inspired me to be the best mother and wife I can be—and that I'm sorry we didn't have the time to repair the past and learn from each of our mistakes. I would tell her that she didn't deserve to have such an unhappy life—and that I wished it could have been different for her. And that I wish I could have been more of a comfort to her—instead of a thorn in her side.

I would tell her that the fact that I have an incredible daughter and husband must have had something to do with her. I would also tell her I am the luckiest person in the world. And I would thank her for that.