

Farrar, Straus & Giroux Reading Group Guide
Miss Aluminum
A Memoir
Susanna Moore

About the Book

Transporting readers to a dynamic era in American culture, acclaimed writer Susanna Moore reflects on her coming-of-age during the 1960s and '70s, a journey that begins with her mother's death when Moore was just twelve years old and culminates in a hard-won arrival at selfhood after years of exploitation.

Leaving her childhood home in Hawai'i with no money, no belongings, and no prospects, seventeen-year-old Moore moves to the east coast, struggling to make ends meet as salesgirl. But she has a gift for making connections, which leads to a modeling career—and to power brokers in Hollywood, where she befriends Joan Didion and Audrey Hepburn, works as a script reader for Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson, and is given a screen test by Mike Nichols. But beneath the glamour of her new life, Moore struggles with long-simmering anguish and a quest to belong.

Mesmerizing and wise, *Miss Aluminum* raises timely questions about trust and love, how women have (or haven't) acquired power, and what it takes to quell deep-rooted fears. We hope the following guide will enrich your reading group's experience of this wry, eye-opening memoir.

“A captivating portrait of a woman in search of herself.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Moore's search for stability during a free-spirited decade is a whirlwind of celebrity encounters and a lyrical exploration of the lingering effects of a mother's death.”—*Publishers Weekly*

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Susanna Moore vividly describes the women who influenced her early perception of the world, particularly her mother, Anne; her grandmother, Mae Shields; Ale Chester; and Connie Wald. What did they teach her about being a woman? How did each of them define success? Which of their lessons did Moore ultimately reject?
2. Discuss the scene that gives this memoir its title (chapter four). How does the story of the Aluminum Association's oddball promotional plan capture the recurring themes in Moore's career?
3. In exquisite detail, Moore remembers the clothes that set the tone for every stage of her young life, from Ale's designer hand-me-downs to the overly formal gown her grandmother lovingly sewed for her. How did her evolving wardrobe reflect her transforming sense of self? Which of those outfits would you have liked to wear? Is fashion a signifier of wealth and class in America anymore?
4. As Moore recalls her father, what image of him emerges? How were some of those experiences replayed in her first marriage (to Bill) and her second marriage (to Dick)? At that

point in her life, what did she need from men? What did society tell her she was supposed to need from men?

5. In chapter four, Moore recounts being brutalized by Oleg Cassini in her hotel room. She explains why it would not have done any good to report it. What did it take for us to progress from those dark days to the recent sea change?

6. The book brings to life many distinct locales, emphasizing Philadelphia, New York, Hollywood, and Hawai'i. If you were to think of these places as characters, what would their personalities be? How do the scenes from the east coast compare to those of the west coast?

7. Posing for the camera was a primary part of Moore's livelihood and identity. As you looked through the photographs she included in the book, what did you learn about the way performance and reality can both be captured through a lens?

8. Moore's nightmares are interpreted by her psychoanalyst as a buried memory and by Sonia (who taught her how to be a mother) as a malignant spirit. How did you interpret the images in her nightmares? What gave Moore the ability to disentangle her mother's mental anguish from her own?

9. Moore's memories are sprinkled with the titles of books she devoured. Why were literary escapes more meaningful to her than the world of acting? How has the written word served as a refuge for you as well?

10. To what degree are the communities described by Moore—from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s—lost worlds? Where did she find a sense of belonging, as someone who gained access to upper-class circles and the counterculture in equal measure?

11. From Dean Martin to Warren Beatty, and Audrey Hepburn to Joan Didion, Moore's memoir features a colorful roster of celebrities. What did she discover about private lives of famous people? How did their communities compare to the her grandmother's neighborhood?

12. As you read about Ale giving Moore the cold shoulder after Dick didn't tip the crew after the honeymoon, what was revealed about the way money, class, and power played out in the world Moore inhabited? What had she learned about those three factors from her parents and her grandparents? How did she cope with these equations as a young woman in an era of rampant sexism?

13. In the book's closing lines, Moore writes, "Her continuous dying had exhausted me, and I wondered if the secret desire of the mournful is to be guilty while innocent." What does this observation say about making peace with loss and overcoming the guilt of being a survivor? In the final scene, what has she discerned about the true meaning of "family"?

14. Discuss any of the other works by Susanna Moore that you have read. How does *Miss Aluminum* enhance your experience of her novels and her nonfiction books about her beloved

Hawai‘i? How did these early chapters in her life give her a keen, unique perceptiveness as a writer?

About the Author

Susanna Moore is the author of the novels *The Life of Objects*, *The Big Girls*, *One Last Look*, *In the Cut*, *Sleeping Beauties*, *The Whiteness of Bones*, and *My Old Sweetheart*, and the nonfiction works *I Myself Have Seen It: The Myth of Hawai‘i* and *Paradise of the Pacific: Approaching Hawaii*. She lives in Hawai‘i and teaches at Princeton University.

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