

## Shadow Daughter – discussion questions

1. Chapter 1 explores the social, emotional, and biological factors that keep families together. Given those powerful forces, do you think estrangement can ever be a positive option?
2. Throughout the book, Harriet talks about the experience of estrangement from both the stranger and estranged's experiences. How will the book be read by those two audiences? Is it possible to have empathy for both strangers and estrangeds?
3. Chapter 4 talks about "The Myth of the Worst-Case Scenario"; what are some of the most common reasons for estrangement?
4. Do you think it's possible to overcome an abusive relationship with family members?
5. On page 163, Harriet writes, "A wise therapist once told me that when your parents don't give you their blessing you must learn to bless yourself. The problem is that without their blessing you are dumb, stuck in the vocabulary of childhood: *I want. I need. I hurt.* You don't have, or don't believe you have, the ability to calm yourself, to release yourself into the world, into your life." What does she mean by that, and how does it connect to estrangement?
6. We live in a culture where we're used to thinking that love can solve any problem. Many of the estranged people interviewed in the book say they love their family members but still choose estrangement. What role does love play in estrangement?
7. On page 50, Harriet writes, "I planned to never have children, though. I was terrified that I would inadvertently do to them what my mother had done to me, and afraid, too, that my mother's ill wish would come true. Then my grandmother died and the need to have a child bloomed in me like a magnolia flower...I was pregnant two weeks later and the next nine months stretched, endless and full of worries. What if the child I carried found me selfish and cold and unworthy of love just as my mother had? What if I didn't love it enough or in the right way? What if my child filled me with rage as I seemed to do with my mother? What if my mother's curse came true?" What is the legacy of estrangement?
8. The book tells stories of dozens of people who have dealt with estrangement in one way or another. Which of those stories stood out to you? Why?
9. Chapter 8 talks about forgiveness and reconciliation. What role does forgiveness play in estrangement? Can you forgive someone and still stay estranged?
10. At the end of the book, Harriet finds herself in the unexpected position of caring for her elderly father and developing a new relationship with him. What does this resolution say about estrangement and families?