Mothers and Other Strangers

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Reading Group Guide

Warning: spoilers ahead! Please proceed accordingly.

1 How does your understanding of a "good" mother evolve over the course of the story? By the end, who did you see as a “good” mother in *Mothers and Other Strangers*, and why? To what extent do the cultural and societal expectations around what makes a "good" mother shape Joni, Beth Ann, Sydney, and Mae’s character and decisions?

2 Sydney and Mae are the only characters we see as both daughters and mothers. How do these dual roles influence their choices and behavior at different points in the story?

3 People often turn to religion and community in times of grief or searching. What role does LilyLou and her church play in Beth Ann’s life? When does she tend to turn toward these communities the most, and when she does, do you think they serve as a coping mechanism, a lifeline, a performance, or something else for her?

4 Sydney swears she will never become her mother, yet we see her repeating Beth Ann’s controlling behaviors as an adult, especially online. Where in the story do you notice Sydney repeating Beth Ann’s patterns, and why do you think she was unable to break this particular cycle of behavior?

5 Beth Ann says, “It was breathtaking, actually, how many things Joni did beautifully, as a mother, while still being able to so magnificently, awesomely, undeniably fuck it all up.” Once you learn the full extent of her mistakes, how does that change your understanding and perception of Joni?

6 If you stripped away the labels of “mother” and “daughter,” who would these women be? How do they define themselves? As artists, friends, believers, influencers?

7 Beth Ann claims that “everything you were good at, as a mother, even brilliant at, was always balanced by the ways you failed.” In your experience, does this feel true about motherhood?

8 *Mothers and Other Strangers* is told from four different points of view and occurs in two different timelines. How does this structure affect your reading experience and understanding of the characters while reading the novel?

9 Sydney calls herself “a person who knew Mae in the real ways, the ways no one else was ever really allowed to.” What do you think makes them so close despite their many differences?

10 Joni and Beth Ann are initially drawn together because their daughters are inseparable, but they developed their own, sometimes fraught, bond as the story progresses: "The push and pull of having a best friend like Joni, the wanting and not-wanting her around." During the tenure of their friendship: In what ways are Joni and Beth Ann actually good for each other, and in what ways are they bad for each other?

11 All through the novel, the mystery of the painting's buyer hovers in the background. Who did you initially suspect and why? Once the real buyer is revealed to be Mae and Sydney's (biological) father, how does that choice deepen the emotional or symbolic meaning of the painting?

12 How does Joni's behavior—after the news of the affair comes out and her death—change the trajectory of the novel? Would it have been kinder to keep Sydney and Mae in the dark about the affair, or did they deserve to know the truth?

13 After reading this novel, has your definition of the meaning of family shifted at all? Which characters, if any, manage to create a version of family that feels genuine and secure, and what do you think they do that makes it feel that way?

14 The book wrestles with whether anyone can truly "start fresh," or whether the baggage of the past holds us back. Who, if anyone, actually manages to rewrite their own story—and how does that question play out in Sydney's and Mae's decisions about their daughters named Alice?

15 What does the dollhouse represent to Mae and Sydney as children? How does its meaning evolve for them as adults?

16 Mae calls herself an "artist," yet she struggles with her sense of talent and "wasted potential." To what extent is her artistic conflict about ability, and to what extent is it tied to family history, self-worth, and her complicated feelings about Sydney, Beth Ann, and Joni?

17 The painting becomes a defining object in Mae's life and self-image. But what does the painting come to embody for Sydney?

18 In what ways does money, or the lack of it, create distance, tension, or resentment among the women over the course of the story?

19 If Sydney and Mae could each speak honestly to the other at the very end of the novel, what do you imagine they would say?