



Book Discussion Guide

Book Group Guidelines

The purpose of Book Club is to read, discuss & enjoy literature

- Book Group is meant to be a ***fun, stimulating & social*** environment. Please enjoy the experience.
- Please allow ***everyone*** an opportunity to speak and share their thoughts on the book. Please make a sincere effort to self monitor your behavior throughout the meeting, to ensure that everyone who wants to talk and share has an equitable opportunity to do so.
- Be a good listener. When someone has the floor, please be considerate and do not engage in side conversation.
- Healthy debates are welcomed, but please always keep it ***polite*** and ***respectful***.
- Be open to thoughts and opinions that are different from your own. There are no wrong or right interpretations of a book – just different perspectives.
- When sharing, please try to make sure that your input is ***relevant*** to the monthly book selection. We will almost always have a little bit of 'social time' before and after the *actual* book discussion, during which to chat about topics *other* than what we just read. That being said, if you're dying to share something that may not necessarily have anything to do with the book selection, please try do so during an 'appropriate' social time, and NOT during designated discussion.

Author Biography

Marisa Silver is the author, most recently, of the novel, *Mary Coin*, a New York Times Bestseller, published in 2013 by Blue Rider Press/Penguin. Silver made her fiction debut in *The New Yorker* when she was featured in that magazine's first "Debut Fiction" issue. Her collection of short stories, *Babe in Paradise* was published by W.W. Norton in 2001. That collection was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year and was a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of the Year. In 2005, W.W. Norton published her novel, *No Direction Home*. Her novel, *The God of War*, was published in 2008 by Simon and Schuster and was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for fiction. Her second collection of stories, *Alone With You*, was published by Simon and Schuster in April, 2010. Winner of the O. Henry Prize, her fiction has been included in *The Best American Short Stories*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories*, as well as other anthologies.



Discussion Questions

Were you familiar with Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother photograph before reading Mary Coin? If so, what assumptions did you bring to your reading experiences about the photograph? The photographer?

When readers are first introduced to Mary, she is in the midst of her adolescence. How would you characterize her as a teenager? Do these personality traits stick with her throughout the novel? How does her grandfather's legacy as the "Cherokee Murderer" impact her?

After being photographed in the Indian princess garb, Mary remarks that "she felt the queer nature of her power, how it made her feel strong and diminished all at once." (46) How is this sentiment echoed throughout the novel? Relate this statement to Vera's perspective of power behind the camera.

On page 6, Walker asserts that he tells his children "all his foundational stories, no matter how humiliating." When considering his relationship with his own father, why does Walker approach parenting in this way? Is it effective? Explore other ways that his childhood has influenced his personal and work related decisions in adulthood.

Mary and Vera both contend with economic hardships throughout the course of the novel, eventually becoming the breadwinners for their families. How do these experiences affect their self-image? Their relationships with their children? Their spouses?

The words "For sure, you'll be lame so" echo in Vera's mind throughout the novel, yet on page 119 she also notes that her limp is one of her greatest advantages. How does photography help her overcome her self-consciousness?

Vera initially views photography solely as an occupation, while Everett is an “artist.” How does her conception of her career change over the course of the novel? Does she ever see herself as an artist? Discuss her ambitions in relation to the expected gender roles of the time.

Compare the marital history of Mary and Vera. Are their marriages borne out of love? Necessity? What do they learn from their failed marriages? How do they assert independence in their relationships?

On page 224, Walker states that “his image of his grandfather must be a construct derived from largely from photographs” rather than his own recollections. What does this imply about the influence of objects and photographs on memory? Do photographs manipulate – or even create – memories? Relate to modern-day culture. Does our constant documentation via cell phone photography and social media manipulate memory?

Walker, Mary, and Vera all express guilt over how they have raised their children. Discuss their concerns and characterize their parenting styles. How do they interact with their children? What do they celebrate about parenthood? What do they regret?

When Mary travels to the Goodwill in Chapter 31, she realizes “how silly the idea of owning was in the end.”(272) Given this, why do you think she buys back all of her items? Explore this in connection with the culture of poverty that Mary was raised in.

On page 184, Vera admits that she is “embarrassed” by her most famous photograph. Why does she have that reaction? Is she ever comfortable with her fame?

The scene where the famous photograph is taken is described twice in the novel, once from Mary’s point of view, once from Vera’s. Discuss the differences in the way the two women experience this encounter. What are the ethical ramifications for both women?

When Mary visits the gallery in Chapter 36, she is looking at the photograph when she overhears someone say, “You can see it all in her face.” Discuss the irony of this arrangement. What does this assert about the relationship between the viewer and the subject in art? About perception and truth?

Discuss the last line of the novel: “There is no erasure.” Why do you think the author chose to end Mary Coin on this note?

Interview with the Author

What drew you to write about a photographer like Dorothea Lange and her most famous subject? A few years ago, I went to an exhibit focusing on photography of the West at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Lange’s famous photo was part of the exhibition. I had seen the image many, many times and was always drawn to the woman’s face, which seems to me such a mixture of strength and resignation, as well as to the curious composition of the photograph—the way the children face away from the camera. But what struck me seeing the photo this time was not the image itself but what was written on the curatorial label next to the image. The description noted that the woman in the photograph did not reveal who she was until she was sick and dying, when she appealed for help from the public in order to pay for her medical care. This fact struck me powerfully. Here was a woman who was the subject of, arguably, one of the most famous images of the 20th century and who, for the better part of her life, did not lay claim to this legacy. I was immediately filled with questions. Did she choose her anonymity or was it chosen for her? Was there something about the taking of the photograph, and its subsequent ubiquity that troubled her? And what must it have meant to her, nearing the end of her life and in a time of physical duress, to have made the decision to finally reveal herself?

What research did you do for the character Vera Dare, who, like Dorothea Lange, had polio as a child, worked in San Francisco as a society photographer, married an artist, and left her own children to travel for the WPA, photographing migrant workers? There is a lot of information about Dorothea Lange's life in biographies, scholarly articles, and interviews. There are also some wonderful filmed interviews that I watched that really enriched my sense of her. I found much about her life both fascinating and resonant—her childhood illness, how she parented, her decision to stop photographing society women and focus on the world around her—and I used many of these details to form a kind of framework for the life of Vera Dare. But once I began to imagine Vera's interiority—her feelings and her thoughts—she became a pure invention for me. The photograph taken by Dorothea Lange, "Migrant Mother," was rooted in time and place. Then the photo began its journey. It became an inadvertent icon and made its way down through the generations in all sorts of forms—as an exhibit in museums, as a document in textbooks, even as a U.S. postage stamp. The life of the original object was interpreted and reinterpreted, and, as a piece of history, it adopted meanings and values that were different from those in play at the moment of its making. I based the characters of Mary Coin and Vera Dare on Dorothea Lange and Florence Owens Thompson, actual people in history. But I was less interested in trying to document the real and verifiable facts of those women's lives than I was in exploring the nature of interpretation.

How did you go about researching the "Migrant Mother" character, Mary Coin?As much as is known about Dorothea Lange is as little that is known about Florence Owens Thompson. There are numerous accounts to be found about the taking of the famous photograph, and all of these accounts essentially have the same handful of details to share about the life of this woman. She was born in eastern Oklahoma. She lived on a subsistence farm. She was either half or full-blooded Cherokee. She had six or seven children. I used these and a few other facts to imagine the life of Mary Coin. I spent time in Central California and I went to Nipomo, where the photograph was taken, but could really only get a sense of the land in its present state from these trips. I used a lot of archival photographs, oral and written histories and memoirs about life in Oklahoma in the early 1900s and California in the 20s

I learned a lot of information about how the government interacted with the WPA photographers, and while this information is not highlighted in the novel, it informs certain key story points. For instance, Vera Dare never learned Mary Coin's name when she took the photograph because the WPA photographers did not take down the names of their subjects. They did not want to put the migrant workers in danger of losing work or being considered troublemakers by the farm owners and so they protected them with anonymity.

And Walker Dodge, the contemporary cultural historian who finds an unexpected connection to Mary Coin? Is this character wholly fictionalized? I knew I wanted to have a contemporary figure to round out the trio of main characters in the book because the book is about history and retrospection. I needed a character who was, in effect, looking backward in time. I wasn't sure how this character would be related to the other two, and I only discovered that through the writing.

I was taken with your nuanced descriptions of Dare finding her vision as a young girl, shifting from studio work to outdoors in New Mexico, and finding her material in the streets of San Francisco teeming with desperate men looking for work. I was quite interested in the idea of how someone stakes a claim for herself as any kind of artist. I think it's not an easy thing to do because it requires that you embrace a notion of yourself as having a singular point of view that is worth exploring and worth exposing to others. So there is a kind of inherent arrogance to it, as well as an acceptance of the value of difference, which is something we give great lip service to in our society but sometimes do everything we can to squash. Vera's attempts to embrace herself as an artist are stymied by the fact that she has allowed others to draw boundaries around her—her society patrons, her husband, her mother. But most importantly, she has drawn boundaries around herself in her effort to erase her obvious physical differences—the limp imposed on her by her childhood illness. So the moment of her stepping out of bounds is kind of a birth for her, a declaration.