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# Reading Group Gold

## *In the Darkroom*

Susan Faludi

### ABOUT THE BOOK

One of *The New York Times Book Review*'s 10 Best Books of 2016

Winner of the Kirkus Prize

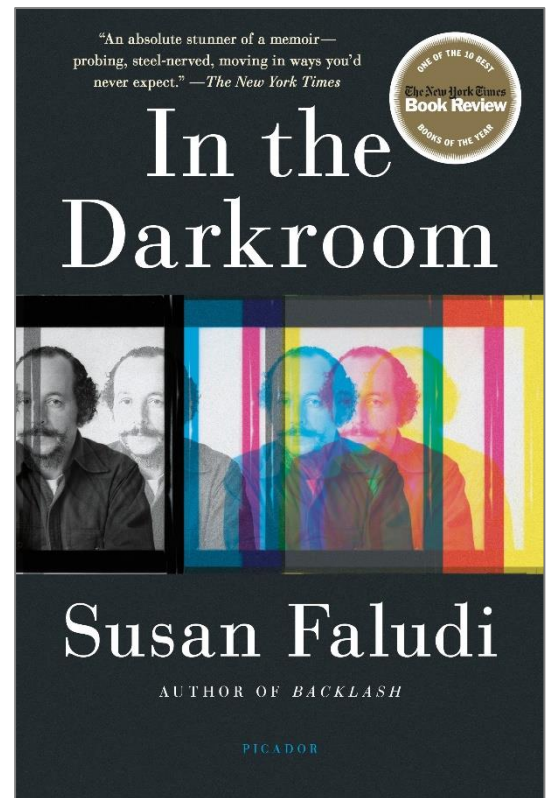
Part memoir, part meditation on the act of remembering, *In the Darkroom* retraces a remarkable journey of the heart, undertaken by prizewinning feminist author Susan Faludi and her elderly, transgender father.

More than two decades had passed since Faludi and her 76-year-old dad had spoken to each other, but in 2004 she received an email from him with a subject line that simply said "Changes." After starting a family and building a successful career as a photo re-toucher for magazines and ad agencies in New York, Steven Faludi had returned to his Hungarian homeland. Susan's recollections of him seemed irreconcilable: suburban dad with an explosive temper; swashbuckling, globetrotting adventurer; Holocaust survivor. Now he was "a complete woman" named Stefánie. Traveling to Hungary to reunite with her mercurial parent, Faludi struggled to come to grips with the metamorphosis, tapping her training as a journalist to unearth the dark histories of her family—and of a country hell-bent on repressing its past.

*In the Darkroom* brings to light compelling questions about identity, the mind's eye, and fractured parental love. We hope that the following topics will enrich your discussion.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In chapter five, the author raises the question that lies at the core of *In the Darkroom*: "Is identity what you choose or what you can't escape?" Is Stefánie's transition a rejection of her origins, or is her new identity a kind of homecoming? What are the forces that have shaped your own sense of self?
2. What role does gender play in parenting styles? Before transitioning, was Steven a "typical" father? Afterward, did he become maternal? Did your parents perform stereotypical gender roles?



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3. What did you learn about Jewish-Magyar collaboration and assimilation, and the decimation that followed the Treaty of Trianon? In what ways does this history continue to repeat itself with other populations, in other locales?
4. *In the Darkroom* was published without any family photographs. What memorable images did you create in your mind based on Faludi's descriptions?
5. By impersonating the enemy, István Friedman (Stefánie) was able to survive and save his family. Would you have been willing to wear a Nazi armband if your life depended on it?
6. What motivated Stefánie to return to Hungary despite the continued anti-Semitism there, and a history in which his government essentially handed his community over to the enemy? Would you like to live in the homeland of your ancestors?
7. Besides technical skill, Stefánie had to possess a particular type of creativity to become such an accomplished re-toucher of photographs and editor of film, producing alterations that went undetected. How did she apply this artistry to her life?
8. Which aspects of Stefánie's personality remained unchanged throughout her life, fueling her sojourn in Brazil, her tumultuous marriage, and her eventual return to Hungary?
9. What does *In the Darkroom* say about the nature of cultural scapegoats? What are the ingredients of paranoia? What makes a population vulnerable to discrimination?
10. Stefánie repeatedly refers to herself as a "lady." What does she think it means to be a lady? How do those expectations compare to your beliefs about what it means to be a woman?
11. Growing up, what did Susan learn from her father about a woman's place in the world? How would the memoir have unfolded if it had been written by a son?
12. What do you predict for the future of Stefánie's underground trans community? Do you have hope that they will achieve equality?
13. When Stefánie began preparing for sex-reassignment surgery in Thailand, she had to lie about her age. How was she affected by transitioning so late in life?
14. What were Susan and her father expecting from each other when they reunited in 2004? What did they end up receiving? What is Stefanie's legacy?
15. As the author gradually coaxed her father to let her tour the county of Pest and visit the places where he spent his youth, how did the architecture, streetscapes, and landscapes begin to transform both Susan and Stefánie? If Budapest were a human being, how would you describe its life story?

16. Are any aspects of your family history off-limits or steeped in unverified lore? Is it always good to know the true history of your ancestors? What is the ultimate power of archives such as the one preserved at the Hungarian Jewish Museum?
17. Susan Faludi's previous books have examined the fallout of gender myths (*Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* and *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*) and the cultural roots of 9/11 (*The Terror Dreams: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America*). If you have read her previous works, what was it like to see her now examine the deeply personal imprints of gender and culture in her own life?

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Susan Faludi** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and the author of *The Terror Dream*, *Stiffed*, and *Backlash*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction. A former reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, she has written for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, and *The Baffler*, among other publications.

*Guide written by Amy Root Clements*

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