

READING GROUP GUIDE

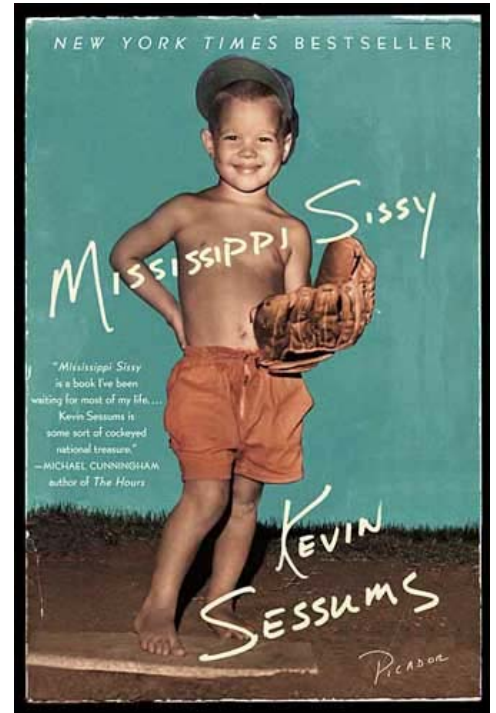
Mississippi Sissy

A Memoir

by Kevin Sessums

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Mississippi Sissy* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Mississippi Sissy*.

About the Book

In a book that echoes the time-honored fiction of Harper Lee and Flannery O'Connor and memoirs by Mary Karr and Augusten Burroughs, Kevin Sessums bring the American South and the experiences of a strange little Mississippi boy to life.

Praise for *Mississippi Sissy*

"Sessums re-creates a colorful cast of characters. . . . [His] unique sensibility shines through . . . in his wonderful ear for language, and his eye for Southern foibles."

—*Elle*

"A charming but bracingly unsentimental work . . . Utterly compelling."
—*People*

"Heroic and heartfelt . . . [Sessums] describes situations with clarity and humility. . . . With no small amount of wit and grace, he captures life then as he saw and heard it."
—Christina Eng, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"With a patiently observant and chillingly sensual voice, Sessums has written an important memoir."
—Matt Saldana, *Jackson Free Press*

"*Mississippi Sissy* is a book I've been waiting for most of my life. . . . Kevin Sessums is some sort of cockeyed national treasure."
—Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours*

About the Author

Kevin Sessums was a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* magazine for fourteen years and at *Allure* magazine for four. He was also executive editor for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. His work has appeared in *Elle*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Playboy*, *Out*, and *Show People* magazines. He was nominated for a Quill Award for his recording of the audio book of *Mississippi Sissy*. He lives in New York City.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe "Mississippi Sissy" other than a memoir? Is it a gay coming-of-age story? Is it a paean to maternal love? Could it be described as a political tract told in lyrical terms? An ode to racial understanding? Are there any terms that you can come up with that would help describe the many levels it achieves?
2. Many writers are mentioned in the chapter titles - Noel Coward, Eudora Welty, Stephen Sondheim, Katherine Anne Porter, Jackie Susann, Lewis Carroll, William F. Buckley. Which of these writers seems to be the biggest influence on Sessums? Are there others who you thought of while reading the book? Why? Did the book make you want to read any other writers? Did it make you want to write your own life's story?
3. There is a vast literature of the-child-as-protagonist - or even of the-orphan-as-protagonist, as in "Mississippi Sissy." Examples: "To Kill a Mockingbird." "The Member of the Wedding." Much of Dickens. Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory." The Harry Potter books. "Cinderella." "Superman." "Jane Eyre." "Heidi." John Irving's "The Cider House Rules." The Baudelaire siblings in "Series of Unfortunate Events." And, of course, "Little Orphan Annie." Why does the plight of the orphan appeal so greatly to readers? Can you think of other examples?

4. Who is the heroine of the book? Is it his mother? Is it his grandmother? Is it Mattie May? Explain your choice.

5. What is your opinion of his father? He seems to be saying that maternal love shapes us and paternal love toughens us. Do you agree? How has each form of love affected your own life?

6. When Matty May rejects the young boy in the cotton field during that summer day and leaves him in tears is she being too tough on him? Or is that the point in the memoir at which she takes command of its moral center? If this scene is not the moral center of the book, then which scene, in your opinion, is? Explain.

7. Sessums portrays his grandparents as racists in the book because of the time and the place in which they themselves grew up. And yet they are also touchingly portrayed. Is it possible to be a racist and also a good person?

8. Sessums is a white writer. Does it bother you that he uses the N-word in the book even though it is always utilized in quotations in dialogue? Could he have been just as true to the time and place and to the characterization of the people in the book without using that word?

9. Religion plays an important role in the book. Do you think its role is more a cultural one or a truly spiritual depiction as written about in the story? Within southern culture is being religious a form of peer pressure? What role has religion played in your own life as both a child and as an adult?

10. What is your opinion of Dr. Gallman, the man who molests him? Do you feel any pity for him? Disgust? Any form of understanding? Do you feel that Sessums is complicit in his own molestation by agreeing to see Dr. Gallman a second time? Sessums has also said, "That is one of the things you never get over if you're molested - your complicity in the act that is perpetrated on you. Unlike rape, which is a violent act committed against its victim, molestation often involves the act of surrender on the part of the molested person since more often than not it is a trusted person who is committing it." Do you agree with this statement? If you do, then is the scene in the movie theatre's bathroom stall a scene of molestation or of rape?

11. How did the murder of Frank Hains affect you as a reader? How do you think it has affected Sessums as a writer and as a person?

12. Many of the reviews of "Mississippi Sissy" have focused on its equipoise as its narrative swings from wit to a kind of wanton sadness. In her remarks about the book, Carole Radziwill, who wrote "What Remains," her own memoir of the deaths of her husband and her best friends, John Kennedy, Jr., and his wife, Carolyn Bessette, highlighted this aspect. "Mississippi Sissy," she said, "manages to be both hilarious and heartbreaking, often in the same moment. It is a poignant story of innocence and sexuality; tragedy and courage. But it is ultimately a tale of perseverance of the human spirit." With that in mind, what parts of the book made you laugh the most? What parts made you cry? And what parts gave you hope?

13. Ever since James Frey and his memoir “A Million Little Pieces” caused such a scandal when it was picked by Oprah, the memoir as a literary genre has been called into question. Does “Mississippi Sissy” help restore respect to the genre or does it, by using the devices of the novel—i.e. large swaths of dialogue, a deliberate narrative arc - call into question as well the veracity of such a literary form? Do memoirists have to be sticklers for absolute truth or is there a greater truth that they can achieve? Indeed, is memory something that can be fact-checked like a piece of journalism? Discuss the Author’s Note in regard to these issues.

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