

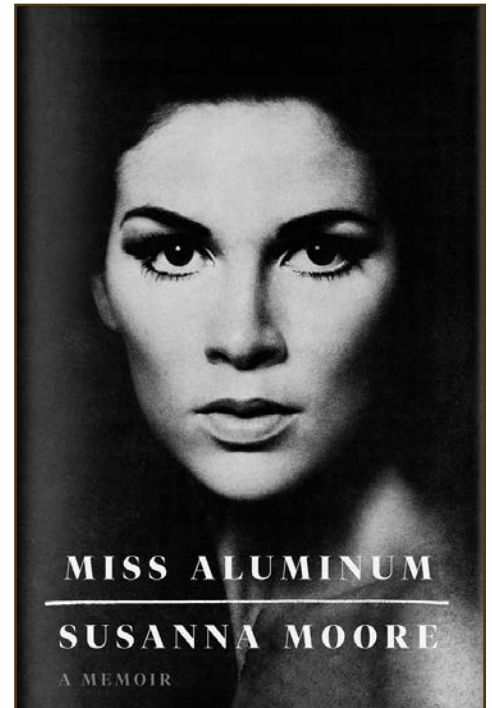
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

Miss Aluminum

A Memoir

by **Susanna Moore**



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Transporting readers to a dynamic era in American culture, acclaimed writer Susanna Moore reflects on her coming-of-age during the 1960s and 1970s, a journey that begins with her mother's death when Moore was just twelve years old and culminates in a hard-won arrival at selfhood after years of exploitation.

Leaving her childhood home in Hawai'i with no money, no belongings, and no prospects, seventeen-year-old Moore moves to the East Coast, struggling to make ends meet as a salesgirl. But she has a gift for making connections, which leads her to a modeling career—and to power brokers in Hollywood, where she befriends Joan Didion and Audrey Hepburn, works as a script reader for Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson, and is given a screen test by Mike Nichols. But beneath the glamour of her new life, Moore struggles with long-simmering anguish and a quest to belong.

Mesmerizing and wise, *Miss Aluminum* raises timely questions about trust and love, how women have (or haven't) acquired power, and what it takes to quell deep-rooted fears. We hope the following guide will enrich your reading group's experience of this wry, eye-opening memoir.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Susanna Moore vividly describes the women who influenced her early perception of the world, particularly her mother, Anne; her grandmother, Mae Shields; Ale Kaiser; and Connie Wald. What do they teach her about being a woman? How do each of them define success? Which of their lessons does Moore ultimately reject?
2. Discuss the scene that gives this memoir its title (chapter four). How does the story of the Aluminum Association's oddball promotional plan capture the recurring themes in Moore's career?
3. In exquisite detail, Moore remembers the clothes that set the tone for every stage of her young life, from Ale's designer hand-me-downs to the overly formal gown her grandmother lovingly sewed for her. How does her evolving wardrobe reflect her transforming sense of self? Which of those outfits would you have liked to wear? Is fashion still a signifier of wealth and class in America?
4. As Moore recalls her father, what image of him emerges? How are some of those experiences replayed in her first marriage (to Bill) and her second marriage (to Dick)? At that point in her life, what did she need from men? What did society tell her she was supposed to need from men?
5. In chapter four, Moore recounts being brutalized by Oleg Cassini in her hotel room. She explains why it would not have done any good to report it. What did it take for us to progress from those dark days to the recent sea change?
6. The book brings to life many distinct locales, emphasizing Philadelphia, New York, Hollywood, and Hawai'i. If you were to think of these places as characters, what would their personalities be? How do the scenes from the East Coast compare to those of the West Coast?
7. Posing for the camera is a primary part of Moore's livelihood and identity. As you look through the photographs she includes in the book, what do you learn about the way performance and reality can both be captured through a lens?
8. Moore's nightmares are interpreted by her psychoanalyst as a buried memory and by Sonia (who teaches her how to be a mother) as a malignant spirit. How do you interpret the images in her nightmares? What gives Moore the ability to disentangle her mother's mental anguish from her own?
9. Moore's memories are sprinkled with the titles of books she devoured. Why are literary escapes more meaningful to her than the world of acting? How does the written word serve as a refuge for you as well?
10. To what degree are the communities described by Moore—from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—lost worlds? Where does she find a sense of belonging, as someone who gained access to upper-class circles and the counterculture in equal measure?
11. From Dean Martin to Warren Beatty, and Audrey Hepburn to Joan Didion, Moore's memoir features a colorful roster of celebrities. What does Moore discover about private lives of famous people? How do their communities compare to her grandmother's neighborhood?
12. As you read about Ale giving Moore the cold shoulder after Dick doesn't tip the crew after the honeymoon, what is revealed about the way money, class, and power play out in the world Moore inhabits? What has she learned about those three factors from her parents and her grandparents? How does she cope with these equations as a young woman living in an era of rampant sexism?

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13. In the book's closing lines, Moore writes, "Her continuous dying had exhausted me, and I wondered if the secret desire of the mournful is to be guilty while innocent." What does this observation say about making peace with loss and overcoming the guilt of being a survivor? In the final scene, what has she discerned about the true meaning of "family"?

14. Discuss any of the other works by Susanna Moore that you have read. How does *Miss Aluminum* enhance your experience of her novels and her nonfiction books about her beloved Hawai'i? How did these early chapters in her life give her a keen, unique perceptiveness as a writer?

About the Author

Susanna Moore is the author of the novels *The Life of Objects*, *The Big Girls*, *One Last Look*, *In the Cut*, *Sleeping Beauties*, *The Whiteness of Bones*, and *My Old Sweetheart*, and of the nonfiction works *I Myself Have Seen It: The Myth of Hawai'i* and *Paradise of the Pacific: Approaching Hawaii*. She lives in Hawai'i and teaches at Princeton University.

Guide written by Amy Root Clements