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Discussion Guide

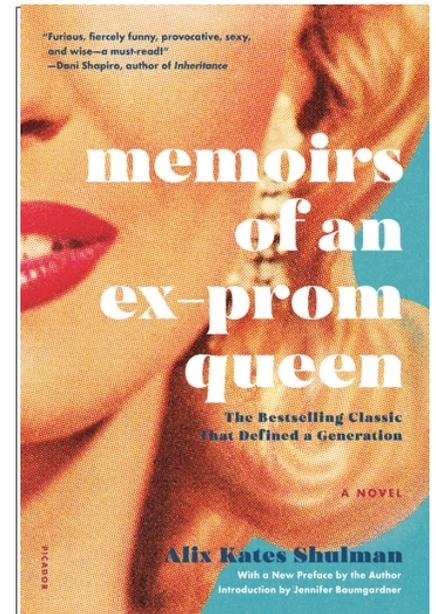
Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen

by Alix Kates Shulman

“A vicious little gem of a novel.” —*Cosmopolitan*

“An extraordinary novel... Sad and witty, expertly conceived and executed... Important.” —Peter Prescott, *Newsweek*

"*Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* is a vivid reminder of just how much—and sometimes, how little—has changed for women in the last 35 years. Typing prowess and wedding-night virginity may no longer be expected, but Shulman's tale of Sasha Davis's struggle to find herself amid conflicting cultural messages about beauty, brains, and sex will be resonant for many more years to come." —Andi Zeisler, editorial/creative director of *Bitch* magazine



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Alix Kates Shulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* created a profound impact on the cultural landscape when it was originally published in 1972. A sardonic portrayal of one white, middle-class, Midwestern girl's coming-of-age, the novel takes a wry and prescient look at a range of experiences treated at the time as taboo but which were ultimately accepted as matters of major political significance: sexual harassment, job discrimination, the sexual double standard, rape, abortion restrictions, the double binds of marriage and motherhood, and the frantic quest for beauty.

The book went on to sell more than a million copies and is regarded today as a classic, one of the first and best pieces of fiction born of the women's liberation movement. With many of its concerns still with us today, this witty and devastating novel continues to resonate with readers, and Sasha Davis has proved herself a prom queen for the ages.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- In Jennifer Baumgardner’s introduction to the novel, she tells us that when it was first published in 1972, it was described as “the first novel of the women’s liberation movement.” Do you agree with this assessment? If it was published today, do you think it would be described in the same way? Why or why not?
- Baumgardner also states in her introduction that it’s important to ponder why it’s essential for social movements to have novels and art. Why do you think this is important and what can a poem or novel do that a political manifesto, for example, cannot?
- The novel begins in medias res, or “in the middle of things.” Did you like this structure? Why or why not? Why do you think the author chose it?
- Sasha Davis, the novel’s protagonist, obsesses about her beauty (or her perceived lack thereof) throughout the novel. Do you think women today struggle with the same obstacles as Sasha?
- From an early age, Sasha is discouraged from pursuing athletics and other activities that are associated with the realm of the boys. Do you think her life and self-image would have been altered had she been allowed to continue to be a “tomboy”?
- While Sasha is in Spain and during her affair with Manolo she says that she was more intimate with him than she’d ever been with a man before. She believes this is because “for the first time in my life I was as much a person as my man.” What do you think she meant by this, and what was it about Spain that made her feel this way?
- Sasha presents the various predicaments women find themselves in based on their looks: “They say it’s worse to be ugly. I think it must only be different. If you’re pretty, you are subject to one set of assaults. If you’re plain you are subject to another.” She continues on and lists the pitfalls of being beautiful, fewer friends, a lower birth rate, and a higher mortality rate. Do women today face similar circumstances or have we made progress? If Sasha had been plain or unattractive, do you think her life would have turned out differently? Would she, for instance, had been able to finish her studies?
- Throughout her life, Sasha is sexually harassed and assaulted. How do you think these experiences shaped and impacted her mental state? How have present-day societal attitudes toward sexual harassment—especially date rape—evolved since this novel was published?
- Sasha’s dad encourages her studies from an early age and her mother also encourages her studies but because a better college would mean a better man. Do you think she would have been happier had she not been encouraged to excel academically?
- Fifteen-year-old Sasha worries when she is crowned queen at the school dance, that the rest of her life’s achievements will pale in comparison to this night. Do you think she was right about this?
- Were you surprised when Sasha ran away at sixteen? What other sides of her personality are revealed during this period away from home?

- The author uses humor throughout the novel. What parts did you find particularly funny, and why do you think these humorous moments are important?
- While at university, Sasha becomes consumed with philosophy and displays some troubling behavior. Do you think she was ill during this period or just entirely consumed with her studies?
- Why was Roxanne’s friendship so important to Sasha?
- Sasha spends much of her adult life in New York City. What is the significance of the city to Sasha? What does it represent for her?
- Throughout the novel, the author inserts other texts into Sasha’s memoir, including letters, recipes, and excerpts from Dr. Spock’s famous book on parenting. What do these insertions add to the novel?
- When Sasha returns home after a long time away, her father hugs both her and her mother and says, “You really are quite as beautiful as you ever were; you look like a girl.” The two women exchange awkward smiles, unsure whom he is complimenting and “not quite wishing to know.” What is it about his comment that makes them both feel so uncomfortable?
- One of the tensest scenes of the novel is the moment when Sasha has an abortion. What did the reactions of the various characters—Sasha, Willy, the doctors—tell you about attitudes toward abortion during this time?
- How does Sasha change when she becomes a mother?
- The novel ends with Willy upset about Sasha’s new haircut. Why do you think the author chose to end the novel in this way?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alix Kates Shulman is the author of three other novels, the award-winning memoir *Drinking the Rain*, two books on the anarchist Emma Goldman, and three children's books. She divides her time between New York City and Maine.



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