

BOOK CLUB KIT

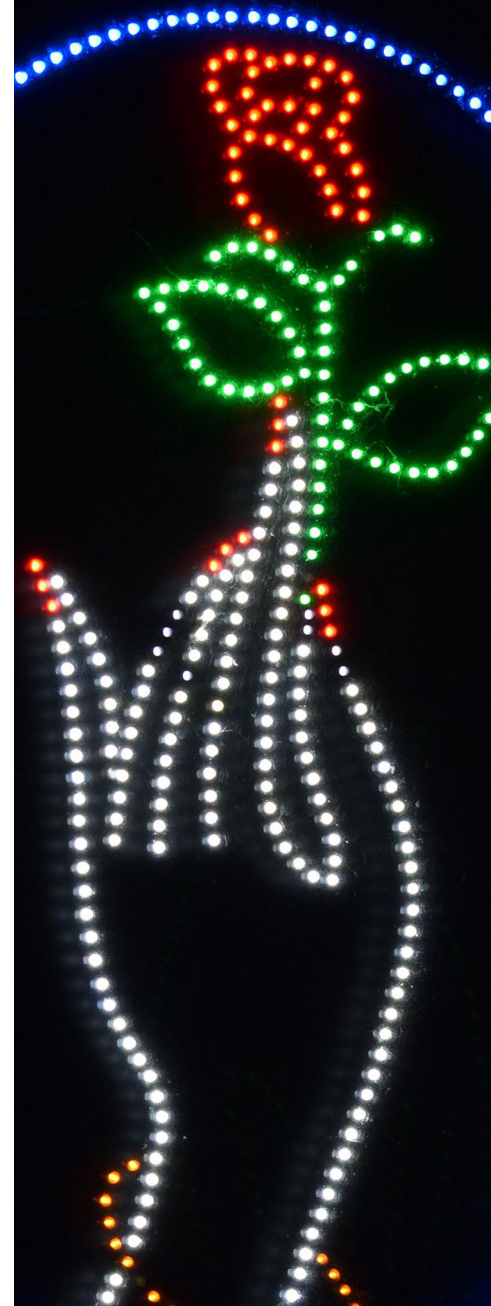


“If your book club is interested in a memoir that delves deep into the loss of a parent, culture, insecurity, body image, mental illness, and family dynamics, this book will fuel much discussion.”

—MICHELLE THOMAS, THE BAKER'S DOZEN BOOK CLUB (NUTLEY, NJ)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 As Susan learns more about her mother's past, she states, "I always knew Má was my hero; I just didn't realize she was everyone else's too." In what ways was Má heroic? Do you admire any of the other people in Susan's life? Why?
- 2 Susan goes by a number of names throughout her life: Suzen, Xuân An, Liễu Huệ Xuân...How do these names help her establish her identity and self-image? How does your name or nickname relate to who you are?
- 3 Do you agree with Susan's mantra *When we feel, we heal*? Have you ever seen it play out in your own life?
- 4 Susan writes: "At the shop, we labored hand and foot, serving Americans. And tonight, even if it was just for two hours, we weren't the servers, we were the served." How does this memory exemplify the American Dream for Susan's family? What other moments in the book hold that same feeling?
- 5 After her mom's death, Susan shares that her family "pretended everything was normal" even though they were "emotionally bankrupt." Where does she look for emotional support outside her family? Which of those avenues seemed the most helpful? Where do you look for support during difficult times?
- 6 What factors played into Má's decision to get plastic surgery? Were those same factors present in Susan's life? Why or why not?
- 7 Susan's arts career gained momentum with her successful performances of *140 LBS: How Beauty Killed My Mother*. What changes came from Susan's decision to share her family story on stage? Where do you think the line between privacy and the public should be drawn when it comes to sharing family history?
- 8 In part IV, Susan explores her mother's refugee journey for the first time. Was her mother's past what you expected it to be? Did you learn anything new about Vietnamese history or culture when reading about her family's refugee experience?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 9 As a child, Susan vowed to never go back to Việt Nam, but she has visited multiple times as an adult. What led to this change in attitude? Has your attitude toward your family's past changed from childhood to adulthood?
- 10 How does Susan's spiritual journey coincide with her relationship with her family? How essential is your spiritual life to emotional healing?
- 11 In part IV, Susan reflects, "All this time, I had invested so much energy in knowing a dead parent when I knew so little about the living one right in front of me." How does reconnecting with Ba change her, especially as she becomes a mother? Does this relationship inspire you to reconnect with someone important in your life?
- 12 Susan describes food as a way to connect with loved ones. Food also has negative connotations in the book when it comes to body image and her mother's death. Discuss this complicated relationship with food and what lessons can be learned from it.
- 13 How did you feel knowing that the doctor who performed the surgery on Má never faced consequences for his malpractice? Did you wish things had gone differently when Susan was searching for justice?
- 14 While looking through her father's photo albums, Susan discovers postcards, photos, cards, and notes that contradicted what she remembered about her father's supporting her dreams. She asks, "How did I come to distort my narrative over the years that I was so unloved?" Have you ever caught yourself misremembering the past?
- 15 Though they had the same parents and grew up in the same household, Susan's siblings' lives and attitudes vary greatly. How would this memoir look if it were told by one of her siblings? If you have siblings, how do you think they would tell your family story differently than you would?
- 16 From the prologue, where the women in the waiting room commiserate and sit together, Susan emphasizes the female relationships in her life. How are these relationships special to her? What relationships with women are important in your life?
- 17 Má experienced trauma from fleeing Việt Nam. Susan experienced trauma from losing her mother at a young age. What were the ripple effects that these events had on their lives?

Suggested by The Book Circle (Calgary, AB, Canada)



AN INTERVIEW

with Susan Lieu

SUSAN LIEU is a Vietnamese-American author, playwright, and performer who tells stories that refuse to be forgotten. A daughter of nail salon workers, she took her autobiographical solo theatre show *140 LBS: How Beauty Killed My Mother* on a 10-city national tour with sold out premieres and accolades from *L.A. Times*, NPR, and *American Theatre*. Eight months pregnant, she premiered her sequel *OVER 140 LBS* as the headliner for ACT Theatre's SoloFest. Within one year she held 60 performances to over 7,000 people. Her award-winning work has been featured at Bumbershoot, Wing Luke Museum, The Moth Mainstage, On The Boards, The World Economic Forum, RISK!, CAATA ConFest, Viet Film Fest, and she has spoken at more than a dozen universities around the country. She serves as an Artists Up mentor, Artist Trust instructor, "Model Minority Moms" podcaster, and board member for international NGO Asylum Access. As an activist, she worked with Consumer Watchdog to pass a law to raise medical malpractice caps. Susan and her sister co-founded Socola Chocolatier, an artisanal chocolate company based in San Francisco. She is a proud alumna of Harvard College, Yale School of Management, Coro, Hedgebrook, and Vashon Artist Residency. Susan lives with her husband and son in Seattle where they enjoy mushroom hunting, croissants, and big family gatherings. *The Manicurist's Daughter* is her first book.

***The Manicurist's Daughter* is about your search to understand your mother, who died as the result of plastic surgery malpractice when you were 11 years old. What was the spark for you to write this memoir?**

After my mother died, my family has never spoken of her or how she died. I'd ask questions, and they would say I was too emotional, stuck living in the past. And for 20 years, I believed them—but I walked around feeling extremely empty, and there was nothing I could do to fill that void.

Once I got married, I got a lot of pressure to have kids, but I couldn't fathom becoming a mother. How could I become a mother if I never knew my own? If I didn't know what to do, who would I call? Both of these questions led me on a wild goose chase to avenge my mother's death. But since my family wouldn't talk, I had to find other ways for answers.

How did you feel when you finally tracked down the plastic surgeon who was responsible for her death?

Devastated! When he operated on my mother, he had more than 19 lawsuits against him, was on probation, and didn't have malpractice insurance. Twenty years later, when I was in grad school, I found out he was still on probation. I was livid and wanted to shame him with a multi-prong marketing campaign. When I was ready to launch my attack, I found out he died from Parkinson's — picking cherry tomatoes in a garden. The gall. Suddenly all my rage turned numb. I had hit a wall. It was impossible to avenge my mother's death without an enemy. That's when my investigation turned inward. I realized I could only experience closure if I could understand who she was, why she got plastic surgery, and how I was like her. My quest shifted to creating one-woman shows and now, this memoir.

What was one of the most meaningful things you discovered about your mother—and yourself— while writing this book?

When my family couldn't talk about my mother, I relied on psychics and spirit channelers so I could receive messages directly from my mother. Psychic Cindy let me know that the art I was creating was “a mother's love,” and that my mother was actively guiding me to bring the work to fruition. By completing this book, my mother and I were fulfilling our life's purpose together. As I recounted her uncanny luck of winning the lottery three times to have enough money to escape Vietnam, the way she led her nail salon like a military general, and the deep and complicated love she had when feeding our family, I began to see the parallels of her to me. I could see the intergenerational trauma she passed down to me and the courage I developed to stop the cycle with my own family. I am her and she is me; her legacy lives on in our memoir.

What was the most meaningful thing you discovered about your surviving family—your father, brothers, and sister—while writing this book?

Everyone is battling their own invisible inner demons. Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time. Once I realized they weren't withholding information from me but rather protecting themselves by not sharing, that's when I changed. And when I changed, they changed (to my face and in private, based on hearsay). Once I could grasp that they were not stagnant beings, that they too were constantly changing, our dynamic had the possibility of shifting. Grieving is not a linear process, but when compassion is involved, we can take one step closer on both our individual and collective healing journeys.

NAIL SALON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Conversation starters with your manicurist

Everyone has a story. Deepen your relationship with your manicurist by finding an easy way in. Be mindful to not ask direct questions that could trigger painful memories.

1. If your manicurist has an English name: How did you choose your name? Was it from a book or movie? What is your Vietnamese name?
2. What's your favorite type of nail design/art?
3. What type of music do you enjoy listening to?
4. What is your favorite dish to eat? To cook? What was your favorite dish to eat as a kid?
5. Do you ever have a day off? If so, what do you do on your day off?
6. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?



CELADON
BOOKS

If you decide to adopt *The Manicurist's Daughter* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at reader@celadonbooks.com or post on social media using the hashtags #CeladonBookClub and #TheManicuristsDaughter.