

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

KALEIDOSCOPE: 20 STORIES CELEBRATING WOMEN'S MAGAZINE FICTION

1. These stories were originally published between 1981 and 2003, most of them in the 1980s and 1990s. If they were written today, how might they be different?
2. "Raspberry Sherbet" is about a young woman with synesthesia. Were you familiar with this condition before you read the story? Is synesthesia a handicap or something positive? Some experts say we all have a little bit of synesthesia. Do you find this to be true in your own case? If so, how?
3. How does the author use adolescent characters to illuminate the problems their parents are dealing with? In "Bullfrog and Moonwalker," Michael Jackson's dancing seems to be all 12-year-old Nathan is concerned about. In "Cutting Weight," Eric is totally focused on wrestling. In "Corky," a 14-year-old focuses on rebelling over being sent to summer camp. In "Trial by Altitude" Jake is determined to finish the perilous mountain hike his father has initiated. How do you know – or do you? – that there are more serious issues underlying these activities? What are they? What point is the author making about how the adults' issues disrupt the whole family?
4. Food is an important issue in several of the stories. In "Pho," Sheila tells herself she's visiting the Vietnamese family she once sponsored partly so she can eat the delicious spring rolls Nga makes and enjoy the "pho"—noodle soup – she remembers. In "Cutting Weight," Eric practically starves himself so he can wrestle in a certain weight class. In "The Lucky One" Rhonda struggles both emotionally and physically with her weight. To what extent are these stories really about food? What are their central themes?
5. Pregnancy and child-rearing have always been important women's issues. "Bird of Passage" and "Miscarriage" deal with pregnancies that are initially unwanted and then welcomed, in a way. "Where Tenderness Begins" shows a young woman afraid she's never going to feel "motherly" after her first baby is born. Can you identify with these issues? Do these stories feel realistic?
6. In "The Pregnancy," a teenaged girl thinks her parents are beyond the sexuality she is discovering in herself – until her mother announces her pregnancy. What do you think of her reaction to this? Is her resentment natural? What about her guilt over that reaction? Did you think she was selfish?
7. "Kaleidoscope," and to a lesser extent, "Returning to Normal," are the only two stories that deal with the issue of child care for the working woman. Why do you think this is?
8. Most women's magazine fiction focuses on the characters' inner lives as expressed through the action of the story – but that action is rarely a suspenseful adventure. "Other People's Voices" and "Trial by Altitude" are two exceptions. Does that make them more appealing to read?
9. Above all, women went to magazine fiction for entertainment, whether it was serious or just plain fun. In the "fun" category, would you put "The Babysitter" about a ghost that babysits? "Watching from the Wings" about the aftermath of being an extra in a film? "Raspberry Sherbet, a frothy romance (despite the synesthesia)?. Are these stories "just for fun"? Or is there a serious side to them, too?