

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (also on www.ellynbache.com)

KALEIDOSCOPE: 20 STORIES CELEBRATING WOMEN'S MAGAZINE FICTION

1. Although these stories were originally published between 1981 and 2003, most of them in the 1980s and 1990s, reviewers often comment on how contemporary they seem. Do you agree? 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*, 14-year-old Ruth focuses on changing her name and grumbling about the unfairness of being sent to summer camp. How do you know – or do you? – that there are more serious issues underlying these concerns? 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 *Returning to Normal* are the stories that deal most directly with child care for the working woman. It's also a minor theme in many of the other stories. Did you expect more or less about this topic, given the years in which the stories take place?
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 which 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*, about a woman who's become romance-shy for good reasons? Are these – or any of the stories here – “just for fun” Or is there a serious side to them, too?