



Study Guide

You
Carried
Me

*a daughter's
memoir*

Melissa Ohden

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A Daughter's Memoir

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion



Published by Plough Publishing House

Walden, New York

Robertsbridge, England

Elsmore, Australia

www.plough.com

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Chapter 1

1. Melissa is afraid to open her medical records and face what they contain, but her curiosity overcomes her fear. Can you relate to her tension and emotions? Have there been comparable moments in your own life?
2. Linda and Ron struggle with infertility, and eventually decide to adopt. Linda says, “If you want a family, it doesn’t matter how it’s made.” Do you agree with that statement? Why or why not?
3. The family’s loss of the farm and move to Storm Lake when Melissa is five is a major upheaval that deeply affects every member of the family. Have you ever had to face a similar dislocation? How did you cope with the losses it entailed?
4. Dustin’s birth sparks Melissa’s interest in her birth family, so Ron and Linda give her the adoption records. As she reads her birth parents’ descriptions she begins to feel more connected to them. She is sure they gave her up for adoption out of love for her and is convinced that knowing them would mean “more people to love.” Knowing that her birth was the result of a botched abortion, do you agree with Ron and Linda’s decision to share these details with Melissa?

Chapter Two

1. Tammy’s unexpected pregnancy sets off a chain of events that results in Melissa learning at the age of fourteen that she survived an abortion. Like many family secrets, this one had explosive and unintended consequences. What is your experience with family secrets?
2. Melissa writes that after learning she had survived an abortion she “felt like the life I had been living was a lie; I had to go back to the beginning and reconstruct it in all its painful truth.” Have you ever felt like that? How did you assimilate the painful truths you encountered?
3. The verse from Jeremiah that Melissa chooses at the time of her confirmation – “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I set you apart” (Jer. 1:5) – helps her understand that God’s purpose for her life supersedes the purposes of those who had tried to destroy her. Does that verse resonate with you? Why or why not?

Chapter Three

1. Melissa says that her tendency to be a people pleaser contributed to her developing a double life to deal with the pain she felt after learning she had survived an abortion. Do you know people who try to protect those they love by sublimating their own pain and heartache?

2. “Bulimia, alcohol, and sex...were my unholy trinity of coping mechanisms.” Melissa says she turned to them in an attempt to regain some sense of control over her life. Have you recognized unhealthy or destructive “coping mechanisms” in your life? What are some healthier ways of dealing with the feeling of being out of control?
3. The birth of Tammy’s son Michael, and the role the entire family plays in supporting Tammy’s decision to raise him, leads Melissa to speculate about the circumstances that might have led her birth mother to seek an abortion. What are some practical ways for communities and individuals to help support single mothers who choose to raise their babies?
4. Poetry and literature play a major role in helping Melissa come to terms with being an abortion survivor. She quotes Robert Frost: “A poem begins as a lump in the throat, a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. . . . An emotion finds the thought and the thought finds the words.” How have books and poems helped you deal with pain and difficulty in your own life?
5. Melissa ultimately brings her pain to God in prayer, and says, “With God’s grace, I was able to turn my gaze from my inward pain and look anew on the world around me.” Have you met with God’s grace in this way in your life?

Chapter Four

1. Melissa’s ultimate career path was very different from the one she first envisioned. Are you doing what you thought you would be doing when you graduated from high school? How have your life experiences affected your choice of a career?
2. “Silenced.” That’s how Melissa describes how she felt at college when she shared that she was an abortion survivor. Do you think it is possible to be a pro-life feminist? Why or why not? What defines true feminism?
3. Melissa relates a startling coincidence: that she attended the same university as her birth mother and that while there she may have often crossed paths with her unknown grandmother. Do you believe in coincidences? What role has coincidence played in your life?
4. The internet makes it possible for Melissa to search for information about her birth parents beyond what was contained in her adoption records, including their identities. Do you believe adoption records should be sealed, as Melissa’s were, or open? Why?
5. Melissa’s work with victims of domestic violence leads her to consider the possibility that her birth mother could have been a victim too. After the death of two young boys she worked with, Melissa asks how a loving God could permit so much evil in the world. How do you answer that question?

Chapter Five

1. As a psychology student, Melissa learns how helping people identify pivotal moments in their lives can cause “epiphanies” that lead to setting new goals “aligned with their true selves.” She has three such epiphanies in this chapter. What pivotal moments in your life have resulted in a better understanding of yourself and changed your goals?
2. Melissa writes that Ryan “embraced the truth about me simply because it made me the woman he loved.” How important is this unconditional acceptance to the success of a marriage?
3. Melissa’s encounter with the man holding vigil outside Planned Parenthood exposes her ignorance about the organization’s role in the abortion industry. Are there times in your own life when a random meeting has forced you to reconsider your assumptions about an issue?

Chapter Six

1. “God helps those who help themselves,” Melissa’s grandfather says to her when she tells him she is giving up her search for her birth parents. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
2. Have there been times when you were tempted to give up in the face of disappointment but continued thanks to the encouragement of a loved one?
3. Melissa’s medical records detail a five-day effort to end her life in the womb. Although saline infusion abortions are not typically performed today, other procedures are used to abort late-term pregnancies. Has reading her records changed your view of abortion? If you support legal abortion, is there a point in pregnancy after which it should not be allowed?
4. Melissa learns the names of her birth parents due to an oversight by the hospital records staff, who failed to redact that information. Have you ever been the beneficiary of a mistake, and if so, how did it make you feel?

Chapter Seven

1. After discovering that her birth father lives just a few miles away from her in Sioux City, Melissa struggles with how to contact him, and what it could mean for him and his family. Do you relate to her dilemma? How would you have resolved it?
2. Handwritten letters are often seen as a relic of the past in today’s culture, but they play a major role in this chapter. Do you write or receive handwritten letters? Are they a form of communication worth preserving?

3. Waiting for an answer from her birth father takes a toll on Melissa, but she doesn't realize at first how it affects Ryan too. Have there been times in your life when a focus on your own needs blinded you to those of your spouse? How did you restore balance?
4. Melissa could have shown up on her birth father's doorstep any day, yet instead she waits for him to respond to her initiative. Was she right to wait? Would you have been able to be so patient?

Chapter Eight

1. Melissa's joy in her pregnancy is tempered by an "unexpected sadness" as she is reminded that her birth mother did not experience pregnancy with the same happy anticipation. In your life, have you found sadness in the midst of joy?
2. "Women deserve better than abortion" is the mission statement of Feminists for Life, the organization Melissa works with as she begins to speak out. How might focusing on this idea unite people who disagree about abortion?
3. Does Melissa's discovery that her birth father has died change your opinion about whether she was right to be patient in waiting for his response to her letter (Chapter 7, question 4)?
4. Melissa sees her encounter with Lori, the nurse who had been at St. Luke's at the time she survived an abortion, as a sign from God that she should give birth to her own child there, despite her fears. Have you ever perceived an encounter as a message from God, and if so, how did it alter your course in life?
5. Lori says she had hoped Melissa would never find out the truth about her birth, but Melissa says she "wouldn't have it any other way." How do you feel? Is knowing the truth always for the best?

Chapter Nine

1. The chapter begins with a quote from Carl Sandburg: "Nearly all the best things that came to me in life have been unexpected, unplanned by me." Has this been true for you?
2. Melissa's experience of holding her daughter in her arms elicits a "surge of compassion for the woman who carried me, and for what she had lost." What are some ways in which you have seen the experience of becoming a parent change a person's attitudes and judgments?
3. Vicki reveals to Melissa that her birth father had not told his wife about Melissa's existence before his death. Again, a family secret had painful and unintended consequences. Are secrets ever justifiable between a married couple?

4. Grandpa Don's openhearted acceptance of Melissa and Olivia helps him deal with his grief over the loss of his son. What ways have you found most effective in dealing with the grief you have faced in your own life?

Chapter Ten

1. Melissa quotes Arianna Huffington: "I think while all mothers deal with feelings of guilt, working mothers are plagued by guilt on steroids." Why is this? What, if anything, can be done about it?
2. Melissa writes: "Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'Forgiveness is a virtue of the brave.' But I think the truly brave are those who ask for forgiveness." Which do you think is harder: to forgive or to ask for forgiveness?
3. Melissa hopes that somehow her own birth mother will hear a message of forgiveness through her public speaking. Do you believe that people who have had an abortion want forgiveness? Do they need it?
4. Many people reach out to Melissa after hearing her speak. Have you ever been so affected by a public speaker that you have written to him or her? What were the circumstances? How did the speaker respond to you?
5. "When in doubt, choose the kids. There will be plenty of time later to choose the work." This quote from Anna Quindlen reassures Melissa that her decision to leave her full-time job to concentrate on her family and her public speaking is the right one. How have you resolved this tension between work and family in your own life?

Chapter Eleven

1. Miscarriage is a topic that is rarely discussed in our culture. How do you react to Melissa's frank description of her experience? Could the opportunity to share such an experience be part of the path to healing for others?
2. Ryan feels helpless in the face of Melissa's grief: "I couldn't do anything to help you or make things better. I couldn't bring our baby back. Men are supposed to protect women and children. And I hadn't done it. I couldn't do it." In your experience, do men and women grieve differently? Are those differences heightened when the loss is of an unborn child?

3. Melissa comes to understand that “even though my arms were empty, the purpose of my motherhood was fulfilled,” because her child would have eternal life with God. What do you see as the ultimate purpose of motherhood?

Chapter Twelve

1. Melissa says that even though she had no way to contact her birth mother, “I used every opportunity to say the words I most wanted her to hear: ‘I forgive you.’” Have you ever tried to forgive someone who couldn’t or wouldn’t accept your forgiveness? Did that change your forgiveness?
2. The issue of abortion is deeply politicized in the United States, reflecting a lack of national consensus that has persisted for more than forty years, since the Supreme Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Do you think it is possible for Americans to forge common ground on this issue?
3. Melissa’s decision to appear in a political ad highlighting presidential candidate Obama’s opposition to legislation to protect infants born alive after an abortion procedure catapults her into the national spotlight. Like many others who speak out, she is subsequently subjected to personal attacks unrelated to the substance of her argument. How might we bring a greater degree of respect and civility into our nation’s political discourse?

Chapter Thirteen

1. “The abortion was against your mother’s wishes.” With these words Melissa begins to learn the truth about her survival and subsequent adoption. Do you think Melissa’s story would have played out differently if she had known this at the beginning of her search for her birth parents?
2. Melissa’s grandmother lied to her daughter, telling her that her baby had died. Are lies ever justified? Was this one?
3. Melissa’s birth mother writes to her: “I need you to keep speaking. You are the first person to ever fight for me.” Melissa believes her mother’s words reflect an understanding that “a woman can never really be separated from her baby; the violence of abortion is directed against both the child and its mother.” Do you agree?
4. Melissa’s Christian faith helps her forgive the grandmother who directly instigated and participated in her attempted abortion and enforced the deception that followed. Do you think Melissa would have been able to forgive so profound a betrayal without the example of Jesus Christ?

Chapter Fourteen

1. Melissa quotes J. M. Barrie: “The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story, and writes another; and his humblest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it.” What are some of the ways in which your life story today differs from the story you intended to write?
2. Ava means “breath of life;” Gabriel means “strength of God.” Do you think the meaning of the names we are given by our parents helps define who we become?
3. Dealing with Ava’s illness strips away all the superficialities of life, leaving Melissa and Ryan with only the essentials. Looking back, do you see any times when hardships have forced you to focus on the essentials in your own life?
4. Melissa asks of Ava, “Who would you be if you weren’t facing all these difficulties?” Reflect on ways your own difficulties have shaped you, for better or worse.

Chapter Fifteen

1. Paul writes, “Hope does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:5). Do you see that reflected in your own life? What are some ways in which hope has sustained you?
2. As a child Melissa recognizes that she doesn’t look like her adoptive family and imagines that she looks like her birth mother. She’s disappointed when she fails to see any likeness in the photographs sent by her grandparents. When they finally meet in this chapter, Melissa discerns a deeper resemblance. Is it important to you to see a physical resemblance among your family members?
3. Melissa’s mother tells her, “My greatest regret is that I did not run away.” Do you have any significant regrets in your life? How do you live with them?
4. When Melissa’s birth mother learns that her baby had not died, but had secretly been put up for adoption by her parents, she struggles with how to trust again. Have you ever struggled to trust again after being betrayed?
5. Melissa writes: “As I thought about the violence that had been done to my birth mother and to me, I recalled a passage from Genesis: ‘You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives’ (Gen. 50:20).” Do you agree with Melissa’s insight? How has God used evil for good in your own life?

Chapter Sixteen

1. Looking back over the story of Melissa's life so far, can you identify specific points at which God's providential care for her was manifested?
2. Melissa says her scars are a sign that God heals. Do you agree? What scars do you carry?
3. Melissa writes: "Many people think abortion is a discrete act that has no lasting effect. They are so wrong! . . . Its effects ripple through generations." Is your response to this statement different than it might have been before you read this book? If so, how has your perspective changed?
4. Forgiveness and gratitude are themes that run throughout Melissa's story. What difference have these made in your life's story?

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