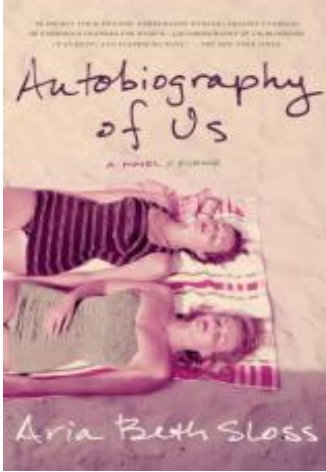


Autobiography of Us

by Aria Beth Sloss



About the Book

TWO LIVES. ONE STORY.

Coming of age in the patrician neighborhood of Pasadena, California, during the 1960s, Rebecca Madden and her beautiful, reckless friend Alex dream of lives beyond white gloves and cocktail parties, beyond their mothers' narrow expectations. As change sweeps the nation --- civil rights, Vietnam, women's liberation --- the two girls' determination to chart a different course brings them closer, until one sweltering evening the summer before their last year of college, when a single act of betrayal changes everything. Decades later, Rebecca's haunting meditation on the past reveals the truth about that night, the years that followed, and the friendship that shaped her. A confession of hopes long forgotten, Aria Beth Sloss' AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF US is an achingly beautiful portrait of a decades-long bond and the victories, sacrifices, and defeats of a generation.

Discussion Guide

1. Describe the friendship between Alex and Rebecca. They seem to be polar opposites, yet their bond is very strong, even from the start. What do you think initially draws them together, and what keeps their friendship alive after so many years?
2. Early in their lives, Alex and Rebecca both find unique callings, especially for women of the era? Alex as an actress and singer, and Rebecca as a doctor. Alex says, "That's the thing about callings?they choose you." Yet, she also believes that you choose your own destiny. "You don't guess about your life, you choose. Or else?You get swallowed up like the rest of them." What does this contradiction say about Alex as a character? What do you think she believes about choice and destiny by the end of the book, and how might Rebecca agree or disagree with her at different points in their lives??

3. Life in 1960s Southern California was all about keeping up appearances. To what extent do the characters in the novel protect their private lives and inner desires? Which characters do not conform to the norms of society, and how are they viewed? If you lived during that era, how differently do you think your life thus far would have turned out?
4. Why does Rebecca keep writing letters to Alex that go unanswered? First when Alex goes off to camp and she stops responding and later as an adult when Rebecca cannot even bring herself to send the letters at all? What motivates her to continue writing?
5. Why does Rebecca feel betrayed after learning of Alex's physical encounter with Bertrand? Why does she go on to spend the night with him herself?
6. Motherhood is an important theme in this book. To what extent do you see Rebecca's and Alex's relationships with their mothers influencing the choices they make at different points in their lives? How do those relationships impact Rebecca's and Alex's own conceptions of motherhood? How would you compare your own relationship with your mother to the ones portrayed in the novel?
7. There is a shift in the relationship between Rebecca and her parents after they learn about her pregnancy. How did you read that shift initially, and how did your perception of it change as the book progressed?
8. Rebecca says: "How little we know the ones we love. How little we know of anyone, in the end." How does knowing and not knowing someone play into the important relationships in this book? Do you believe the kind of knowledge Rebecca refers to in that line is actually possible? Do you think that Rebecca was able to know Alex, in the end?
9. Life seems to get in the way of many of the characters' dreams. Discuss the theme of unfulfilled dreams in the novel. To what extent do the social and cultural constructs of the time get in the way of these characters realizing their dreams? Would they all face the same or similar issues today?
10. What do you make of Rebecca's decision not to go with Alex in the end? Do you think she made the right decision? Do you think she really, as she says, regrets "everything"?
11. Rebecca tells Violet that Alex was "the great love" of her life. What does that phrase mean within the context of this book? What does it mean to you?
12. The story, set against the backdrop of America's civil rights movement and feminist wave, is deeply engaged with the issues that characterized the era. It is evident how certain aspects of society and life have changed, yet how far have we come since then? Are the obstacles faced by the women in this book still relevant today? If so, where and how have you encountered them?

Author Bio

Aria Beth Sloss is a graduate of Yale University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is a recipient of fellowships from the Iowa Arts Foundation, the Yaddo Corporation, and the Vermont Studio Center, and her writing has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, the *Harvard Review*, and online at *The Paris Review* and *Five Chapters*. She lives in New York City.

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