

Discussion Questions

Phantom Limb

by Janet Sternburg

1. Do you think we all have the condition of phantom limb, someone or something no longer with us who remains a part of us?
2. **Phantom Limb** treats the inevitability of losing one's parents. Does our society prepare us adequately for this loss? Sternburg writes about the limitations and strengths of one's own parents. Do you feel that those limitations and strengths return in you?
3. Faced with the author's decision to put her mother in a nursing home, would you have done as she did? Why? Why not?
4. Sternburg begins the book with the need to expand her own heart. By the end, she has learned to forgive. Is this a journey you have taken, or want to take? To what extent could you identify with the events of her early life?
5. To what extent could you identify with the events of the author's early life? "My father is sitting behind me, my mother in the back, the three of us in a very different configuration from the way we sat on our weekly drive in our 1950s Buick with its mighty fins. Then I was in the middle dying for air." What can you glean from the relationship of the three?
6. How did you react to Janet's descriptions of her mother? How would you characterize Sternburg's relationship with her mother at the beginning? At the middle? At the end?
7. What do you think of the author's cousin, who rolls up her windows and screams? Is that familiar? What do you make of the passage: "All over America people are screaming trying not to be heard?" What do you make of this wish not to be heard? Is it fear of hurting parents? Of being an embarrassment? What might keeping quiet about one's emotions do to a person? In this story, the car serves as a safe place. What are other safe places to cope with excess emotion?
8. What does a crisis of this sort do to a marriage? In the book, there is support, and also strain. What can you detect from this book, and in others' experiences?
9. "I am a lioness and you are my cub." These words are the author's mother's response to learning that her daughter has cancer. How do you interpret this? Is she saying, "fight?" Is she herself a fighter? Were you surprised, as Sternburg was, by this reaction?
10. At the end, there's an image of Janet cradling the artificial leg in her arms. How do you interpret that image? She is left with her parents' possessions. What do you think she did with them all?
11. What is an inheritance? Is it money? For the author, furniture plays a symbolic role, as does her interpretation of objects like a ring and a wig. What is an inheritance to you? Your legacy?
12. Why do you think the author found out so much about her mother's medical condition? There are many different ways to respond to an illness, or any emergency. Consider the ways Janet did it. Do you think that trying to control events by knowledge helps one to cope?

13. "Is memory worth it if it brings pain?" This is the question asked in the book. How would you answer this question?

14. Are there phantom limbs in your own life? People no longer with you but who remain part of you?

15. . The author writes that she is "aware of how much ordinary pain there is in the world, and questions: "why so universal an experience is so little acknowledged." Do you agree with that observation? If so, why do you think we are so reluctant to acknowledge not feeling well? What are the consequences? Do you agree with the author when she writes that: "We need new words for illness."

16. Sternburg asks a number of philosophical questions in the book --- What does it mean to be good? Can one fix things? What is the nature of memory? What does she mean when she says "memory is diasporic?" And later, when she says it can also be "congregant?" How does she answer the questions she poses? How would you?