

Reading Group Guide for MARY COIN

1. Were you familiar with Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* photograph before reading *Mary Coin*? If so, what assumptions did you bring to your reading experiences about the photograph? The photographer?
2. When readers are first introduced to Mary, she is in the midst of her adolescence. How would you characterize her as a teenager? Do these personality traits stick with her throughout the novel? How does her grandfather's legacy as the "Cherokee Murderer" impact her?
3. After being photographed in the Indian princess garb, Mary remarks that "she felt the queer nature of her power, how it made her feel strong and diminished all at once." (46) How is this sentiment echoed throughout the novel? Relate this statement to Vera's perspective of power behind the camera.
4. On page 6, Walker asserts that he tells his children "all his foundational stories, no matter how humiliating." When considering his relationship with his own father, why does Walker approach parenting in this way? Is it effective? Explore other ways that his childhood has influenced his personal and work-related decisions in adulthood.
5. Mary and Vera both contend with economic hardships throughout the course of the novel, eventually becoming the breadwinners for their families. How do these experiences affect their self-image? Their relationships with their children? Their spouses?
6. The words "*For sure, you'll be lame so*" echo in Vera's mind throughout the novel, yet on page 119 she also notes that her limp is one of her greatest advantages. How does photography help her overcome her self-consciousness?
7. Vera initially views photography solely as an occupation, while Everett is an "artist." How does her conception of her career change over the course of the novel? Does she ever see herself as an artist? Discuss her ambitions in relation to the expected gender roles of the time.
8. Compare the marital history of Mary and Vera. Are their marriages borne out of love? Necessity? What do they learn from their failed marriages? How do they assert independence in their relationships?
9. On page 224, Walker states that "his image of his grandfather must be a construct derived from largely from photographs" rather than his own recollections. What does this imply about the influence of objects and photographs on memory? Do photographs manipulate—or even create—memories? Relate to modern-day culture. Does our constant documentation via cell phone photography and social media manipulate memory?
10. Walker, Mary, and Vera all express guilt over how they have raised their children. Discuss their concerns and characterize their parenting styles. How do they interact with their children? What do they celebrate about parenthood? What do they regret?
11. When Mary travels to the Goodwill in Chapter 31, she realizes "how silly the idea of owning was in the end." (272) Given this, why do you think she buys back all of her items? Explore this in connection with the culture of poverty that Mary was raised in.

12. On page 184, Vera admits that she is “embarrassed” by her most famous photograph. Why does she have that reaction? Is she ever comfortable with her fame?
13. The scene where the famous photograph is taken is described twice in the novel, once from Mary’s point of view, once from Vera’s. Discuss the differences in the way the two women experience this encounter. What are the ethical ramifications for both women?
14. When Mary visits the gallery in Chapter 36, she is looking at the photograph when she overhears someone say “You can see it all in her face.” Discuss the irony of this arrangement. What does this assert about the relationship between the viewer and the subject in art? About perception and truth?
15. Discuss the last line of the novel: “There is no erasure.” Why do you think the author chose to end *Mary Coin* on this note?

Questions for the Author

1. What initially drew you to write about Dorothea Lange’s famous photograph?

A few years ago, I went to an exhibit focusing on photography of the West at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Lange’s famous photo was part of the exhibition. I had seen the image many, many times and was always drawn to the woman’s face, which seems to me such a mixture of strength and resignation, as well as to the curious composition of the photograph—the way the children face away from the camera. But what struck me seeing the photo this time was not the image itself but what was written on the curatorial label next to the image. The description noted that the woman in the photograph did not reveal who she was until she was sick and dying, when she appealed for help from the public in order to pay for her medical care. This fact struck me powerfully. Here was a woman who was the subject of, arguably, one of the most famous images of the twentieth century and who, for the better part of her life, did not lay claim to this legacy. I was immediately filled with questions. Did she choose her anonymity or was it chosen for her? Was there something about the taking of the photograph, and its subsequent ubiquity that troubled her? And what must it have meant to her, nearing the end of her life and in a time of physical duress, to make the decision to finally reveal herself?

2. Can you discuss the research you did in preparation for the writing process? Are the character portraits anchored in fact?

Both Mary Coin and Vera Dare are fictional characters and their thoughts and feelings and the words they speak belong only to them. But I drew on many of the facts of both Dorothea Lange’s and Florence Owens Thompson’s lives for inspiration. For instance, Dorothea Lange suffered from polio as a child and walked with a limp all her life. Although I cannot say how her illness impacted Lange, I was able to explore how it affected Vera Dare, in terms of romance and sexuality, and with regards to her development as an artist who has great sympathy for others’ suffering. Lange made the choice to have her children live away from her home at different times in her life. I was able to explore the motivations for and the consequences of that decision for Vera Dare. Although comparatively little is known about the life of Florence Owens Thompson, I

took inspiration from her Native American heritage, her early life on a subsistence farm in eastern Oklahoma, and most especially from the letter she wrote to *U.S. Camera* complaining about the use of the photograph, and, of course, the newspaper article that was written when she was close to dying and needed funds for her medical care. Walker Dodge, the novel's third major character, is a pure invention.

One of the pleasures I found in writing about a different time in history was the unusual places my research took me. For instance, I had to learn how lumber was milled in California in the 1920s, and what kinds of attractions might be included in a traveling carnival in rural Oklahoma in the first decade of the twentieth century. But what I enjoyed above all about the research was finding the details that impacted my characters on an emotional level. It was less important to me to find out the make and model of Mary Coin's car, than to learn how the seats of that car were sprung and to think about what all that driving might do to her work-worn back.

3. *Mary Coin* moves seamlessly between the past and present eras. What are the challenges in balancing this type of narrative structure?

Time is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of fiction for me—how it is compressed or extended, how a writer can take pages to explore the complexities of a single moment, and conversely, how entire swaths of time can be left only to the reader's imagination. In some ways, *Mary Coin* is a novel about time because it is the story of how a single moment, captured in a photograph, lives on through decades and impacts the lives of the people involved into the future. The novel engages with another aspect of time, as well, because the story is about history, how it is made, how it is recalled, and how our interpretations of the historic moment change as that moment recedes into the past and becomes memory, that highly subjective thing. The structure of the novel, the way it moves in and out of time, and even doubles time by repeating the scene when the photograph felt like a perfect way to suggest some of these deeper implications.