

A young child with blonde hair, wearing a light blue dress, holding a spotted stuffed animal. The image is partially obscured by a white, torn-paper-like border on the right side.

“An astonishing book, full of heartbreak
and love and hard-won wisdom...”

— WILL SCHWALBE,
bestselling author of *The End of Your Life Book Club*

pieces of my
mother

a memoir

melissa
cistaro

reading group guide

1. The action of *Pieces of My Mother* alternates between Melissa's final days with her mother in 2007, and the story of Melissa's childhood, which ranges over a number of years. Did you find one storyline more intriguing than the other? Were you eager to get back to one or the other?
2. In what ways does Melissa use her imagination as a child to escape her pain and longing for her mother?
3. Do you know any mothers who have left a child or a family behind to pursue a different life? What about father who has left their family?
4. As a child, Melissa chooses friends who have separated or divorced parents. Unlike Melissa, most of her friends live with their mothers, rather than with their fathers. Do you think our society is more accepting of fathers who leave their families behind? How does our society view mothers who abandon children by choice?

5. As she is growing up, Melissa collects various knickknacks and treasures. She displays them in her room, carefully cleaning and rearranging them. Later she says, “I give value and meaning to ephemera and small objects.” Why does Melissa focus so much on the treasures in her room? How are the objects more reliable than the people in her life?
6. Melissa describes her and her brothers as a tribe of three. With an absent mother, working father, and live-in sitters that come and go, Melissa and her brothers learn to rely on each other in childhood. How does this bond carry through adulthood? Are there points when the siblings’ bond wavers?
7. What are the unique traits Melissa develops by growing up in a house of boys with frequent live-ins?
8. How do the addictions and alcoholism that surround Melissa as a child impact her?
9. As a teen, Melissa yearns to connect with brothers by adapting some of their behaviors—like being more daring and troublesome. Does she succeed in getting the attention she is seeking?
10. At what point does the girl Melissa lose hope that her mother will return to the family, resuming a traditional mother role?
11. What traits does Melissa seem to inherit from her mother? From her father?

12. Why do you think Melissa's mother chose to keep a file hidden and marked "letters never sent," rather than sending them? How do the letters that Melissa's mother "never sent" help inform the story?
13. What similarities do you find in Melissa's prose and her mother's letters?
14. During her mother's final days, Melissa says, "There is so much more I need to say and fix before my mom dies. But words can only come when I have everything inside me under control." The last words she says to her mother are about planting a garden in her memory. Do you feel that Melissa ultimately finds closure with her mother in their last exchange?
15. In adulthood, Melissa frequently questions her abilities as a mother. "I am trying so hard to do the right things, to be a good mother," she relates. And, "When I interact with other mothers on the school yard, I feel transparent." Do you think Melissa would be more confident today if she had grown up with her mother, rather than apart from her?
16. If you could write a letter to anyone in your family or from your past—who would it be and what would you say to them? Would you send it?