

Reading Guide for
READING LIPS: A MEMOIR OF KISSES
by Claudia Sternbach

“Sternbach... is an impressive stylist and a candid guide through her life. Although the reality of kissing serves as the connecting thread, each essay is grounded in one of a wide variety of complementary topics, such as the first love as an adolescent, best friends, parents, sisters, birthdays, tennis, summer camp, air travel, marriage, divorce, cancer, rape and death—among others. Sternbach has carefully considered how to make a life story interesting through unusual yet approachable formatting, and she throws humor, sarcasm and self-deprecation into the mix....A memorable, laugh-out-loud, cry-out-loud essay collection for both genders and all ages.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

Discussion Questions:

1. Does the thread of transformative kisses spark any memories of your own?
2. Sternbach’s structure is unique. Does it read more true than the linear recounting we expect? How so?
3. Why do you think the publisher chose the cover image?
4. How is this a memoir for men?
5. This book is about connection and about not connecting at all. Discuss.
6. Ms. Sternbach has a tattoo on her arm. It reads: “Hope is the thing.” Could that have been an epigram for this book?
7. Does Sternbach seem to reflect an era here and, if so, how does she manage to connect with younger readers?
8. Trust is a theme in this book. Trusting others. Trusting oneself. Discuss.
9. Sternbach is a survivor in more ways than one. Writing this memoir becomes another way to survive. And being remembered matters. Discuss.
10. The publisher says in the copy that Sternbach is “trying to get life right.” What does this mean? Are you? Is “getting life right” new to our culture or just more public now?
11. How does Sternbach “take ownership” of her own story? What does this mean to you?

Claudia Sternbach is a writer who is equally at home on both coasts. She has one foot in Manhattan where her daughter resides and the other in Northern California, where her husband is planted as firmly as the redwoods. She is the author of another memoir, *Now Breathe* (1999, Whiteaker Press), has been published in several anthologies as well as in major newspapers, and is the Editor in Chief of *Memoir (and)*, a literary journal.

From the Author:

Danger ahead for this kiss and tell?

For more than 15 years I have been a newspaper columnist free to write anything I want about my family. Because we don't live in the same city. Because they never explore online.

Because on Sunday when my column comes out they are all busy doing things like watching sports on television, going to brunch, shopping at Target or lolling about reading a fat Sunday newspaper that does not include in its many pages a column written by moi.

It has come in handy. I have never once had to stomp my foot and say, "It did too happen!"

That may be about to change. Oh, I have stopped writing the column, but I have written a memoir. It isn't the first time a "tell all" of mine has been published. But the earlier book, "Now Breathe," came out more than a decade ago and was about having cancer. And that was my story to tell. My sisters did not try to convince me that my memory might be as shaky as a California fault line. Partly because they weren't the ones being irradiated every day and partly, I'm guessing here, because it is considered unseemly to pick on someone with cancer. In any case, they let slide anything they may have had issues with. But I am healthy as a horse now and have chosen once again to write about my life which includes two younger sisters, twins, and my version of our growing up together. Oh, other folks make the pages as well. And they too make take issue with some of what I spill. But I don't spend every Thanksgiving with them passing the mashed potatoes and gravy like I do with my family. So in just a few weeks, when Reading Lips, a Memoir of Kisses, published by Unbridled Books, comes out I may have some explaining to do.

I am trying not to lose sleep over it. After all, my sisters are free to write their own books. And I am older so I should have better recall when it comes to what took place in our small house in the Oakland hills. Of course they may decide to write their own books claiming that because I am the eldest, I am actually beginning to suffer a bit of memory fog.

These are the dangers of writing a memoir. Friends and family coming out of the woodwork to tell the world that the author is a big fat liar. And this particular memoir, with kissing involved, easily begs to be examined by people from my past. They may wonder if any of their own kisses have been included in "my" life story. If they have made the cut, would their memory of the event match mine? And if their lips met mine and I did not include that particular historical moment in the book, would they be let down? Relieved? Truth is trickier than one might imagine. However I do have one thing on my side. More than 15 years worth of newspaper columns filled with tales of family and friends. Evidence. A recorded history I have been able to use as a reference source as I worked on this latest narrative. Proof of all that happened right here in black and white.

Because you know, if it is in the paper, it must, simply must, be true.