

**MISS AMERICAN PIE:
A Diary of Love, Secrets and Growing Up in the '70s
By Margaret Sartor
Reading Group Guide**

In **MISS AMERICAN PIE**, Margaret Sartor, a fiercely determined girl from rural Louisiana, presents a poignant portrait of American life during the 1970s, a story that transcends its southern setting and delights in the drama and comedy of everyday life as it is lived by ordinary people. Candid and captivating, Margaret Sartor's account of her life from age twelve to eighteen is sometimes heart-wrenching, often hilarious, and always endearing. Sartor's extraordinary ability to examine her life against a backdrop of social tensions, such as the sexual revolution and desegregation, absorbs the reader in a style that is spare, moving, and saucy. Young Margaret tells her story via a diary and her recorded words illustrate that as she is evolving into a woman, the community in which she resides, as well as her family members, friends, and classmates, are changing, too.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) What are some of the key personal and social issues raised by the story Margaret Sartor tells in her book? Though these events occurred decades ago, do any of these issues resonate now?
- 2) Margaret Sartor begins her book in January 1972, when she is a seventh grader "at Robert E. Lee Junior High in Monroe, Louisiana, the United States of America, the Earth, the Universe," and immediately states she is bored out of her mind. Is Margaret's assessment of her life more indicative of her age or where she resides?
- 3) Margaret is best friends with her next door neighbor, Tommy Townsend, who remains a close friend through her adulthood. How would this relationship be described?
- 4) What role does Momma Doll, Margaret's maternal grandmother, play in her life? What does she offer that Margaret's parents do not?
- 5) Margaret mentions that her sisters Mary and Stella "have baby books with lots and pictures and writing," that her baby book "has only three pictures" and that her brother, Bill "doesn't even have a baby book." Does birth order have an impact on Margaret's self-esteem?
- 6) Horseback riding is a frequent activity for Margaret and she is very sensitive to the animals and pets that come and go in her life. Do animals fill any voids for her?
- 7) Do Margaret's keen observations about her family and friends have an impact on the level of anxiety she feels?
- 8) The school board in Margaret's town decides to integrate the two formerly segregated public high schools by requiring all ninth graders to attend the former predominantly

white high school and all tenth graders to attend the previously all black high school. Margaret's father assures her that people will get used to it. Margaret's mother appears to be more worried about sex and violence in movies than she is about desegregation of the schools. Are Margaret's parents more progressive than other residents of their town?

9) Margaret's Aunt Lou suffers from depression. How does this affect Margaret's family? Does Aunt Lou's illness influence the way Margaret views her own mental health?

10) In high school, Margaret meets Jackson Bishop, a handsome athlete whom she dates off and on for years. What bonds Margaret and Jackson? How is Margaret's relationship with Jackson different from her relationship with her other longtime beau, Mitch Hardy?

11) Margaret idolizes her cousin Angela and notes "it's scary how much I love her." Yet, Margaret and Angela become distant as adults. What causes the split?

12) Margaret's parents have another baby, Sara, when her mother is 45 years old and her father is 55. What impact does the newest member of the Sartor family have on Margaret?

13) Tommy Townsend, Margaret's best friend, reveals he is gay. Is their relationship changed by this disclosure?

14) Margaret is accepted at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas as a President's Scholar. Why does she want to attend college far away from home?

15) Christianity plays an important role throughout Margaret's life, although her parents are not devoutly religious people. Why are questions of religious and moral responsibility so important to Margaret? Does her faith influence the decisions she makes?

Suggested Reading:

Black Ice by Lorene Cary; *Bronx Primitive: Portraits of a Childhood* by Kate Simon; *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* by bell hooks; *Still Alive: A Holocaust Childhood Remembered* by Ruth Kluger; *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* by Mary McCarthy

Margaret Sartor lives with her husband, Alex Harris, and two children in Durham, North Carolina, where she teaches at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. She is a photographer and the editor of three books, most recently *What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney* (coedited by Geoff Dyer).