

DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Memorial Drive:
A Daughter's Memoir*
by Natasha Trethewey

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Pulitzer Prize-winner Natasha Trethewey served two terms as the 19th Poet Laureate of the United States (2012–2014), while also serving as the Poet Laureate of the State of Mississippi (2012–2016). She is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir* (2020); a book of nonfiction, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010); and five collections of poetry: *Monument: Poems New & Selected* (2018), which was longlisted for the 2018 National Book Award; *Thrall* (2012); *Native Guard* (2006), for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize; *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002); and *Domestic Work* (2000), which was selected by Rita Dove as the winner of the inaugural Cave Canem Poetry Prize for the best first book by an African American poet. She is also the editor of *The Essential Muriel Rukeyser* (2021), *Best New Poets 2007: 50 Poems From Emerging Writers*, and *Best American Poetry 2017*. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Beinecke Library at Yale, and the Bunting Fellowship Program of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard. From 2015–2016, she served as poetry editor of the *New York Times Magazine*. In 2017 she received the Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities, and in 2020, she received the Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry from the Library of Congress. A member of both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, she was elected to the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets in 2019. At Northwestern University she is Board of Trustees Professor of English in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences.

BOOK SUMMARY

A chillingly personal and exquisitely wrought memoir of a daughter reckoning with the brutal murder of her mother at the hands of her former stepfather, and the moving, intimate story of a poet coming into her own in the wake of a tragedy.

At age nineteen, Natasha Trethewey had her world turned upside down when her former stepfather shot and killed her mother. Grieving and still new to adulthood, she confronted the twin pulls of life and death in the aftermath of unimaginable trauma and now explores the way this experience lastingly shaped the artist she became.

With penetrating insight and a searing voice that moves from the wrenching to the elegiac, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Natasha Trethewey explores this profound experience of pain, loss, and grief as an entry point into understanding the tragic course of her mother's life and the way her own life has been shaped by a legacy of fierce love and resilience. Moving through her mother's history in the deeply segregated South and through her own girlhood as a "child of miscegenation" in Mississippi, Trethewey plumbs her sense of dislocation and displacement in the lead-up to the harrowing crime that took place on Memorial Drive in Atlanta in 1985.

Memorial Drive is a compelling and searching look at a shared human experience of sudden loss and absence but also a piercing glimpse at the enduring ripple effects of white racism and domestic abuse. Animated by unforgettable prose and inflected by a poet's attention to language, this is a luminous, urgent, and visceral memoir from one of our most important contemporary writers and thinkers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does photography work as an integral aspect of how Natasha tells her mother's story?
2. In what ways does Natasha demonstrate that those around her were socially conditioned to downplay or overlook the severity of her mother's abuse? What do those details reveal about the South of her time and about the nation? What do those details also reveal about the forms of misogyny that persist and prevent social justice for battered women?
3. What do you think of the relative absence of Rick Trethewey in the period of Gwen's remarriage? How might Joel's abuse of Gwen and Natasha, as well as Gwen's embrace of the Afrocentricity of the 1970s, have prefigured his marginal presence during this decade?

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