

Breath: A Lifetime in the Rhythm of an Iron Lung

By Martha Mason

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Breath*, Martha Mason's powerful memoir of a spirited lifetime spent in an iron lung.

About this book

Martha Mason enjoyed a typical small-town childhood—two nurturing parents, an idolized older brother, countless pigtailed friends, shy boys passing notes, and endless afternoons spent barefoot in sunny fields. The only time Lattimore, North Carolina lost its shine was during polio quarantines, when Martha and her brother Gaston were kept indoors on tantalizing summer afternoons. But despite the quarantine, disaster struck the Mason family: Gaston contracted polio and died immediately. The day of the funeral, Martha tried to hide her crushing headaches and skyrocketing fever, hoping to spare her parents a double heartbreak.

As Martha slowly recovered from polio, she was faced with devastating news: She would live the rest of her life in an iron lung, which would breathe for her. Doctors told her to enjoy the last months of her limited life: She might not live beyond the year. Martha's parents responded by taking their daughter, iron lung and all, back to Lattimore, where the community embraced this beloved girl who was “still Martha—just in a different package” (236). With the support of her family and friends, Martha finished high school at the top of her class, then charmed the students and faculty of Wake Forest University, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Back in Lattimore and on the verge of a writing career, Martha faced her biggest challenge yet: caring for her mother as dementia overtook her aging mind. With a fleet of faithful caretakers at her side—and later, with the help of voice-activated computer technology—Martha was able to compose *Breath*, a heartfelt tribute to the family and friends that brought the world to her.

For discussion

1. In her preface, Anne Rivers Siddons writes of Martha Mason, “She was never above the world's woes. Spending the best part of her life in an iron lung just didn't happen to be one of them” (xv). What typical “woes” does Martha face throughout *Breath*? Which of her everyday challenges can anybody relate to?
2. *Breath* doesn't begin at the beginning, with Martha Mason's childhood. Why do you think Martha opens her memoir with the story of her mother's decline and her own journey toward writing independently? How would the memoir be different if Part Two—the story of Martha's childhood, illness, and recovery—came before Part One?
3. When her mother first shows signs of mental decline, Martha says, “I was not ashamed of my mother's condition; I couldn't allow her image to be tarnished . . . I cautioned Ginger not to discuss our upheavals with anyone except me” (37). How does Martha come to write and publish her family story? How does she balance her mother's privacy with her desire to write about her past?

4. In describing her childhood in Lattimore, Martha writes, “one by one, the circles of Lattimore assured me of security, strengthened me with challenges, and rewarded me with adventures” (113). Could this description also fit the Lattimore of Martha’s adulthood? What is Martha’s attitude toward her community, both before her illness and after her periods away from Lattimore? Are these “circles of Lattimore” ever threatened or broken? If so, when?
5. Martha recalls Gaston’s first gun and the accidental shooting that could have killed both children. What does Martha learn from this incident, after she shoots her father’s car and Gaston takes the blame? What lessons do her father, her mother, and Gaston impart to her? How do these lessons serve Martha later in life?
6. Miss Burley, Martha’s physical therapist at Grace Hospital, says, “In the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t matter what happens to us. What matters is how we react to what happens” (191). How does Martha apply this lesson to her life? How do her parents react to their family tragedies: Gaston’s death, and Martha’s near death and disability? What helps her parents face and overcome these heartbreaks?
7. “Doc Dour” tells young Martha, ““You’re basically an excellent mind and an exuberant spirit locked inside an inert body—a prison. Can you live with that?” ‘No,’ I said emphatically, ‘but I can live *above* it’” (223). Explain the difference between “living with” and “living above.” What strategies does Martha employ to “live above” her physical limitations?
8. While writing an essay in her fourth grade class, Martha realizes, “I collect people!” (245) Who are some of the most colorful personalities in Martha’s “collection” of people? What benefits and pleasures does she get from her collection?
9. Discuss Martha’s drive to academic success, from hospital-room lessons with Mrs. Lee, to conversations with Wake Forest professors, to hours spent researching on the internet. What makes Martha such a superior student? What intellectual lessons did she learn from each of her key educators?
10. Consider Martha’s writing career, and the stumbling blocks she encountered before she wrote this memoir. How did Martha react when her writing was put on hold by her mother’s illness? What impact did technology have upon her independence as a writer? What personality qualities seem to make her a strong, accomplished storyteller?
11. Discuss Ginger’s evolving role in the Mason household. What were Martha and Euphra Mason’s first impressions of Ginger? How does Ginger change over the course of the memoir? What makes her such a capable and dedicated assistant to Martha?
12. It took Martha years to pin down a rotation of dependable, likeable helpers. What lessons of trust and dependability did Martha learn from her assistants? Were you surprised by any of her employees’ behavior? Why or why not?

13. Martha writes, “People from here and there have sometimes felt sorry for me because they see me as a person who is *trapped* in a useless body, *trapped* in an iron lung, *trapped* in a place not even big enough for a stoplight. They need not shed tears for me” (300). What is a better word to describe Martha’s state, if “trapped” is incorrect? What experiences, voyages, and relationships has Martha experienced from her iron lung?
14. In describing her mother’s mental decline, Martha writes, “Physical problems pilfer from the body, but mental problems are identity thieves” (43). Is it possible to compare Euphra Mason’s mental disability in old age to Martha’s lifetime of physical disability? Why does Martha imply that mental problems are more challenging than physical problems?
15. *Breath* ends with a long description of one of many “Old Girls’ Parties” (328). What about this day seems special, and what is typical for Martha’s life? Why does she close her memoir with this lively, friend-filled day?

Suggested reading

Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life: An Illness and a Healing*; Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*; Ann Patchett, *Truth & Beauty: A Friendship*; Jean-Dominique Bauby (translated by Jeremy Leggatt), *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*; Kay Redfield Jamison, *Nothing Was the Same*; Kim E. Nielsen, *Beyond the Miracle Worker*; Mary Karr, *Lit*; Jeannette Walls, *Half-Broke Horses: A True-Life Novel*; Anne Rivers Siddons, *Off Season*; David M. Oshinsky, *Polio: An American Story*; Kathryn Black, *In the Shadow of Polio: A Personal and Social History*.

Martha Mason, who is believed to have lived longer in an iron lung than any other person, resided in her family home in Lattimore, North Carolina, attended by three faithful assistants. She died in May 2008.