

**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 presents a portrait of growing up in rural Louisiana during the 1970s that transcends its southern setting. Crafted from diaries, notebooks, and letters, this deeply personal yet universally appealing memoir moves with ease between the seemingly trivial concerns of hairstyles and boys to the more serious questions of faith and identity. Young Margaret examines her life against a backdrop of social tensions and a family in flux. *Miss American Pie* tackles all of the decade's major issues - desegregation, drugs, the sexual revolution, the rise of feminism, and the spread of evangelical Christianity - with humor, frankness, and unexpected insight.

- 1) 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?
- 2) Margaret’s best friend is her next-door neighbor, Tommy Townsend, and he remains a friend through her adulthood. How would you describe this relationship?
- 3) Do Margaret’s keen observations about her family and friends have an impact on the level of anxiety she feels? Is Margaret a typical adolescent in this regard or is she unusual?
- 4) Horseback riding is a frequent activity for Margaret and she writes a lot about her horses and pets. What role do animals serve in Margaret's life? Discuss the significance of family pets in your own childhood.
- 5) Tommy’s mother, Ellen Townsend, and Margaret’s maternal grandmother, Momma Doll, play important roles in Margaret’s life. What do these adults offer that her parents do not?
- 6) When the school board in Margaret’s hometown decides to force the integration of the two formerly segregated public high schools, Margaret tells her father the situation could be bad. He says 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 Montgomery?
- 7) Margaret’s Aunt Lou suffers from depression. Does this influence the way Margaret views her own mental health?

8) 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.” What impact does birth order have on Margaret's self-esteem?

9) In high school, Margaret meets Jackson Bishop, a charismatic and devoutly Christian boy whom she dates off and on for years. What bonds Margaret and Jackson? How is Margaret’s relationship with Jackson different than hers with her other longtime beau, Mitch Hardy?

10) Margaret idolizes her cousin Angela and notes “it’s scary how much I love her.” Yet, Margaret and Angela become estranged as adults. What causes the split? Are there relationships in your own life that resemble this one?

11) Margaret’s mother, Bobbie Sue, becomes pregnant when she is 44 years old and her father, Tom, is 54. What impact does her mother’s pregnancy have on Margaret and on the rest of her family?

12) Margaret’s best friend, Tommy Townsend, reveals to her that he is gay. How is Margaret’s life changed by this disclosure?

13) Christianity plays an important role throughout Margaret’s life, although her parents are not particularly religious people. Why is religious devotion so important to Margaret? How does it influence the decisions she makes?

14) Margaret’s world is populated by a number of vivid characters -- from her irrepressible mother and practical father to her trusted friend Tommy and nemesis at school, the cheerleader Bonnie Dell. How does Margaret’s world compare to your own as a teenager?

15) Some aspects of Margaret’s family and social life are specific to the 1970s. Which issues still resonate for teenagers today?

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 other books, including *What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney*.