

TEA LEAVES, A MEMOIR OF MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS **by Janet Mason**

Discussion Questions

1. The book opens with (Jane) the narrator's "atheist, Bible-burning, skeptical-of-anything-less than scientific mother, saying "Your grandmother read tea leaves." The narrator is in her mid thirties and this is the first time that she had heard this. What are your first impressions of the mother, based on this contradictory information?
2. When Jane is correctly diagnosed with fourth-stage cancer, she declares that she is "Somebody" in the doctor's office – even if she has "to die to get that way." Why does this intelligent, articulate woman think she is a "nobody"?
3. What does Jane mean when she says she has become "Somebody"?
4. What are some of the mother's frustrations with the medical system? How does the daughter handle this?
5. When the narrator's partner, Barbara, learns that Jane has fourth-stage cancer, she initially tells the narrator that she doesn't want her to go to her parent's house all the time. Why does she say this?
6. What role does the narrator's early experiences in working in a box factory play in her experience of relating to her grandmother's experiences working in a candy factory and then in a textile mill?
7. What are some other examples of the narrator's "class consciousness"?
8. The narrator is the first person in her family to have graduated from college. She says that she is grateful for the doors that her education has opened for her, but the truth is that she doesn't want to work in an office. Why do you think she feels this way?
9. The narrator keeps hoping and thinking that her mother is going to get better. Given that Jane has been diagnosed with fourth-stage terminal cancer, do you think this denial is a coping mechanism that is helpful? If so, how?
10. How does the narrator's relationship with her partner grow through the experience of caretaking her terminally ill mother?
11. The book delves into the narrator's personal history of going to women's rights marches and attending a women's roller derby exhibition when she was a teenager.

How does this experience of being exposed to the exception of strong women in her 1970s adolescence influence her?

12. Is it different today for young lesbians? Are they routinely exposed to more images of strong women? Does it matter?
13. When the narrator attends her high school reunion and confronts her childhood tormentor, she concludes that "I was somebody." How does this experience mirror her mother's life? What is the significance of her confronting her childhood nemesis?
14. The narrator and her mother become much closer as the result of the experience of caretaking. How does this happen?
15. How does the narrator come to know herself better through her mother's stories?
16. Near the end of the book, in the chapter entitled "Through the Garden," the narrator does a meditation with her mother. When the meditation ends, her mother tells her she brought something back, opens her clenched hand, and hands her daughter "esteem." What is the significance of this?
17. What is the significance of the mother's empty portfolio that the narrator finds at the end of the book? How does she carry on the artwork that her own mother, though talented, did not pursue?
18. The narrator's partner, Barbara, is close with her own mother also. How does this deepen the connection between them?