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Discussion Guide

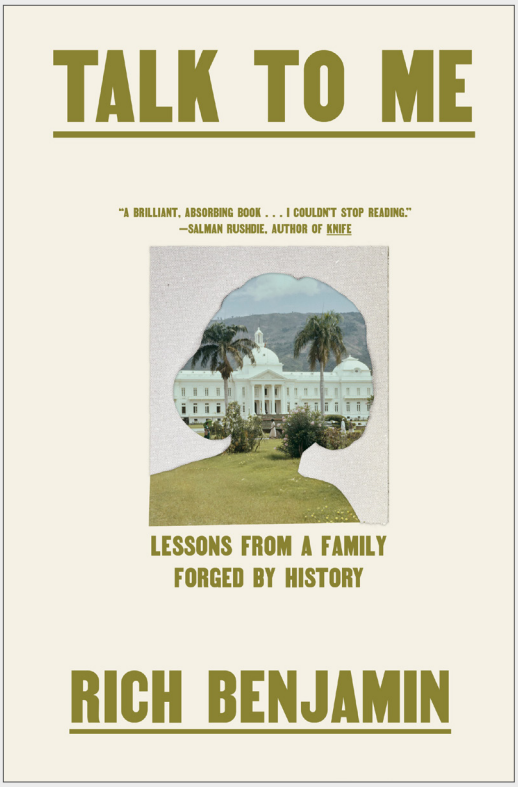
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk to Me

Lessons from a Family Forged by History

Written by RICH BENJAMIN

Pantheon | Hardcover
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Also Available: e-Book, Audio Formats



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book's title, *Talk to Me*, gestures toward both an invitation and a longing—a son's effort truly to know his mother, Danielle, despite decades of silence. What do you think the title means to Benjamin by the book's end? Have there been people or subjects in your own family that felt difficult or impossible to "talk to"? What made conversation hard, and what might have made it possible?
2. At the heart of the memoir is a buried family history: in 1957, Benjamin's grandfather Daniel Fignolé served as president of Haiti for only weeks before a U.S.-backed coup forced the family into exile. Why do you think this story was kept secret within the family for so long? What purposes—protective or harmful—can silence serve across generations?
3. Benjamin braids together intimate family narrative and sweeping political history, arguing that the personal and the historical cannot be separated. How does the book make the case that public events shape private lives? Can you point to a moment in your own family's story that was set in motion by a larger historical or political event?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4. The memoir traces how difficulty can be transmitted from one generation to the next, even when the original events are never discussed. How does Benjamin show this inheritance moving through his mother and into his own life? What do you understand "inherited" or "intergenerational" trauma to mean after reading this book?
5. Benjamin portrays his grandfather as both a heroic populist champion of Haiti's poor and a flawed man who was distant and, at times, harmful to his own family. Why do you think Benjamin resists offering a simple verdict on him? What is gained by holding admiration and criticism at the same time?
6. Benjamin's identity sits at many intersections—an American son of a Haitian mother and a Guinean father, and a gay man who came of age during the AIDS epidemic. How do these different threads of identity shape the questions he brings to his family's past? In what ways do your own multiple identities shape the questions you ask about where you come from?
7. The book makes a pointed argument about the long reach of French and US imperialism and its consequences for Haiti. Its consequences, Benjamin reveals, are still visible today. What did you know about Haiti's history before reading this book, and how did the memoir complicate or change that understanding? Why might a family story be an effective way to teach a national or international history?
8. Much of the book is driven by Benjamin's urgent desire to understand his mother before it is too late. What does the memoir suggest about how well we can ever truly know our parents? Did reading it change how you think about the people who raised you, or the questions you might want to ask them?
9. As the US marks the 250th anniversary of its founding, *Talk to Me* invites a more pointed reflection on what "founding" has meant in the Americas. Haiti, born of the only successful slave revolution in history, declared its independence in 1804—a republic founded on the radical claim that all people are free, achieved by the very people the American founders kept enslaved. Yet Benjamin shows how the US, decades later, helped engineer the coup that toppled his grandfather and shattered his family. Since the US has repeatedly intervened to constrain many countries' sovereignty (Panama, Cuba, Guatemala, the Philippines, Iraq, Mexico, Venezuela, and Iran, etc), how do you understand the historical tensions between the US and the world? And as Americans celebrate 250 years, what responsibilities, if any, come with acknowledging those entanglements? What does Benjamin's family story reveal about the "shared fate" of two republics whose histories are far more entangled than the official narratives of either usually discuss?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

10. Benjamin frames *Talk to Me* as abn story about lessons—about how history "forges" a family, and ultimately all of us, often without our awareness. What do you take to be the central lessons of the book? How might recognizing the ways history has shaped you change how you move through the world?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rich Benjamin is a cultural anthropologist and the author of *Searching for Whitopia*. His writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and elsewhere, and he's appeared as a commentator on MSNBC and CNN. His work has received support from the Bellagio Center, Civitella Ranieri Foundation, Columbia Law School, the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, the Ford Foundation, Princeton University, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the Harvard-Radcliffe Institute.



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