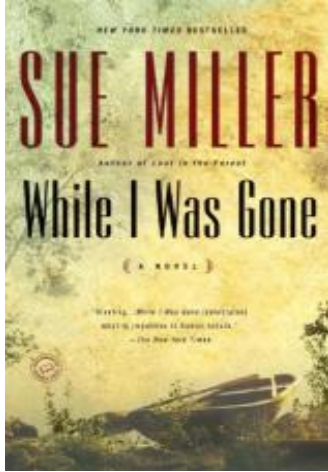


# While I Was Gone

by Sue Miller

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## About the Book

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Sue Miller's **While I Was Gone**. We hope they will aid your understanding of the many themes and issues that underlie Miller's powerfully moving story of a middle-aged woman who, drawn by the currents of passion, grief, and nostalgia, puts at risk everything she has always held dear.

Joey Becker is a fifty-two year-old veterinarian, happily married for twenty-five years to Daniel, a devoted small-town minister, and the mother of three beloved daughters. She has almost forgotten the old self she left behind when she married Daniel, a lost and fearful girl who, back in the Sixties, found what she thought was a safe haven in a commune full of bright and idealistic young people like herself.

Violent death had ended that idyll; now, thirty years, later, one of the Joey's old housemate comes back into her life and reawakens her memories of youth, of infinite possibility, of freedom. Torn by conflicting emotions, Joey is forced to examine her past and the new life she has made for herself, and to radically rethink her old ideas about love, family, work, and the heartbreaking process of growing old and letting go.

## Discussion Guide

1. Joey describes the strange feeling she has in the boat with Daniel before Eli Mayhew comes back into her life as a premonition. Daniel, however, describes it as an "admonition" (96). Do you think that Daniel is, in the end, correct? If so, against what is Joey being admonished?

2. **While I Was Gone** might be described as the story of a midlife crisis. Joey is dismayed by "the impossibility of accepting the new versions of oneself that life kept offering. The impossibility of the old versions vanishing" (11). Even the new version, she knows, will soon disappear, and she feels sorrow for "what had been our life in this place and was

already--this is what I felt--passing. Had always been passing" (100). Why does Daniel seem to reconcile himself to this process so easily? Does Joey herself reconcile herself to it in the end? If so, what has helped her to accept it?

3. Why do you think Joey chose to become a veterinarian? Which of her early experiences might have influenced her in this decision?

4. Does Eli's choice of euthanasia for his dog, Arthur, tell us anything about Eli? Does the fact that Joey, as a vet, agrees to perform such operations tell us anything about her? After Arthur dies, Eli says he feels as though they've committed some crime together, a suggestion that disturbs Joey. Why is she disturbed? Do you think she might on some level agree with him?

5. Joey ponders whether her attraction to Eli might be due to the fact that "the middle-aged Eli contained....me also. The self that had known him then. Myself-when-young" (138). Does this seem an adequate explanation for her feelings? What else might account for them?

6. How many times during the course of her life does Joey "run away"? Why has she developed this recurring pattern? What, in general, is she fleeing? Do you think, as she occasionally does, that her marriage and her career are in themselves a sort of running away? As the book ends, do you believe that she has stopped running?

7. Everyone in **While I Was Gone** seems to have a different idea of what love is or should ideally be. How do these ideas differ? How are they tested during the course of the novel?

8. Do you believe that Joey made the right decision in turning Eli in to the police? Does Eli have any justification in claiming that he has morally redeemed his life through his work? Does the fact that the police decide not to pursue Joey's accusation strike you as, in the end, the right thing for all the characters involved, or does it bother you?

9. "There are always compromises, of course," Joey says about her marriage, "but they are at the heart of what it means to be married. They are, occasionally, everything" (95). What compromises have Joey and Daniel each made in order to stay married? What does she mean when she says they are occasionally "everything"? What reservations does Daniel have about Joey's work, and what reservations does Joey have about Daniel's?

10. Daniel and Eli take a quick dislike to one another, based primarily on Eli's almost mocking criticisms, as a man of science, about Daniel's religious faith. Do you believe that the moral gap that opens between the two men reflects on their different philosophies? If so, does Miller imply that religious faith is "good," and that a purely scientific outlook lacks some essential moral dimension?

11. Cass tells Joey, "I'm just not interested in what you and Dad have. In a safe life....In sweetness and light" (152). Do you think that Joey and Daniel do live a "safe life"? Does anyone, for that matter? Is it even possible to make your life or your marriage safe? Does Joey herself feel that she has taken a safe way out? If so, is she correct?

12. In what ways does Cass resemble her mother? In what ways are they different?

13. Joey's (or Licia's) friends in the group house feel her to be elusive. Years later, her daughter Sadie says the same thing. Do you, as a reader, find this to be the case? Is the "real" Joey different from Joey as she consciously presents

herself to the reader?

**14.** After Joey tells Daniel about Eli's revelations at the Boston Ritz, Daniel asks "So what does all this have to do with your going to Boston secretly to meet him?", and Joey "understood that where the story for me was somehow all of a piece, for him it was two quite separate narratives, with two separate meanings" (210). Which of them is looking at the evening correctly? Are the two narratives quite as connected as Joey found them to be, or as separate as Daniel sees them?

**15.** Eli says to Joey, "I suppose it could be said that I need a kind of forgiveness from you" (201), adding that he has already forgiven himself. Joey replies, "I don't think it suffices to forgive yourself" (202). Does Joey, in fact, forgive Eli in the end? Does she forgive herself? Joey realizes that she needs a very personal type of forgiveness from Daniel, while Daniel himself makes such requests only of his God. Which approach do you think is the right one?

## Author Bio

Sue Miller is the bestselling author of *MONOGAMY*, *THE ARSONIST*, *WHILE I WAS GONE*, *THE DISTINGUISHED GUEST*, *FOR LOVE*, *FAMILY PICTURES*, *INVENTING THE ABBOTTS* and *THE GOOD MOTHER*. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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