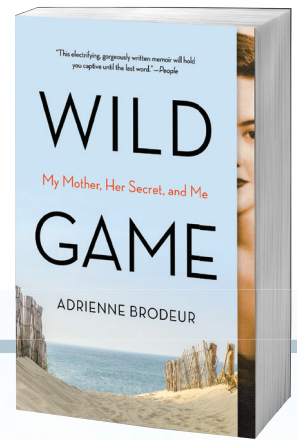


# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR WILD GAME BY ADRIENNE BRODEUR



## INTRODUCTION

On a hot July night on Cape Cod when Adrienne was fourteen, her mother, Malabar, woke her at midnight with five simple words that would set the course of both of their lives for years to come: *Ben Souther just kissed me.*

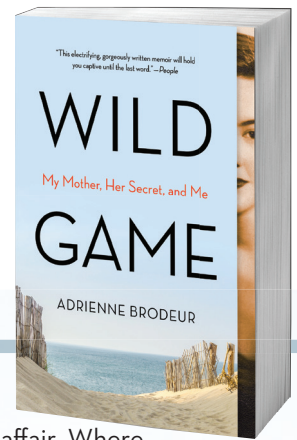
Adrienne instantly became her mother's confidante and helpmate, blossoming in the sudden light of her attention, and from then on, Malabar came to rely on her daughter to help orchestrate what would become an epic affair with her husband's closest friend. The affair would have calamitous consequences for everyone involved, impacting Adrienne's life in profound ways, driving her into a precarious marriage of her own, and then into a deep depression. Only years later will she find the strength to embrace her life—and her mother—on her own terms.

*Wild Game* is a brilliant, timeless memoir about how the people close to us can break our hearts simply because they have access to them, and the lies we tell in order to justify the choices we make. It's a remarkable story of resilience, a reminder that we need not be the parents our parents were to us.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do we learn about the author from how she tells her tale—both what she chooses to tell, and the tone of voice in which she tells it? Is this a story about her mother's misbehavior, or about something else?
2. Revisit the Mary Oliver poem, "The Uses of Sorrow," that serves as an epigraph to the book. Do you see the darkneses in your own life as gifts, or would you wish some of them away? Is growth possible without suffering? Consider Margot's advice to Rennie that happiness is a choice. Is gratitude in the face of life's difficulties a habit of mind we can choose to cultivate?
3. Malabar makes life more interesting for everyone, including us as readers. Do you feel a little bewitched by her charms? Would she be as compelling without her flaws? Do you admire her? If so, in what ways?
4. How does Malabar upend traditional roles for women, and how does she subscribe to them? How has her mother Vivian's influence shaped her sense of identity, as well as her relationships with other women? Rennie's friend Kyra diagnoses Malabar as lonely, and says that loneliness is about not being known for who you are. Does Malabar know herself?
5. Malabar's marriage to Charles and her romance with Ben occur within a privileged milieu at a time when gender roles were narrowly defined. What are the values of this social set, and how do they do harm to its members? Can the follies of the characters be blamed in part on an unhealthy worldview?
6. Compare Ben's conduct during the affair to Malabar's. Whom do you feel more sympathy for? When you look at all the adult characters in the book, is there a villain in this story?
7. Rennie is a victim of harm, a beneficiary of kindness, and an actor—for good and ill—in other people's lives. Which of these roles does she have the most difficulty acknowledging? Do we learn more about how to live from our parents' mistakes or from what they do right?

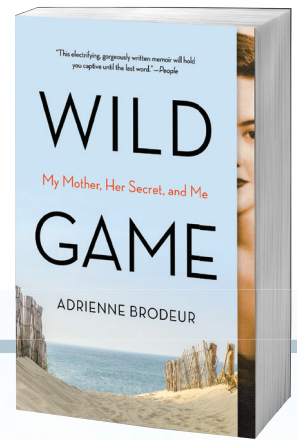
# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR WILD GAME BY ADRIENNE BRODEUR



8. “Understandable but not acceptable” becomes Jack and Rennie’s mantra in light of the affair. Where does Rennie demonstrate that she doesn’t accept her mother’s behavior? Do you think she might hold her mother more accountable? Who is helped more by forgiveness: the forgiven or the forgiver?
9. How does Rennie’s involvement in her mother’s deception hurt her relationship with herself? And how does it damage her relationships with other people in her life? By the end of the book, have all the wounded relationships been healed?
10. Rennie manages to separate from her mother, assume ownership of her own life, and chart a new path. What are her strengths, and how do we see her using them first to help her mother, and later, using them as a force for good in her own life? What other resources does she employ to help her become the person she wants to be? Does she inspire you to address aspects of your own life that are holding you back?
11. Rennie has two experiences where time collapses and the layers of her past rush in: just before her wedding and after she gives birth to her daughter (pp. 176, 223). What do these moments do for her? Have you had a similar experience that has granted you a profound glimpse of your life?
12. Throughout the story, secrets are kept—about Christopher, about the affair, about Charles’s aneurism—ostensibly to protect others from pain. Is there anything wrong with this logic? The author says that lying comes with the territory when your parents get divorced, and you don’t share information about one parent if you think it will disturb the other. Do lies of omission pave the way for bigger lies? Is a lie ever completely harmless?
13. Is it fair of Malabar to demand that Rennie never sell the necklace? Which verdict of an appraisal would be worse: for the necklace to be valuable or valueless? Would you do as Rennie does and avoid the question? Is there an heirloom in your family that’s been divisive?
14. The author shows us Cape Cod as a place of beauty, history, and bounty. In what ways does the setting contribute to the meaning of the story?
15. Rennie actively reads to help her clarify and articulate her experience. Margot tells her, “You have no idea how much you can learn about yourself by plunging into someone else’s life (138).” What light does this story shed on your own experience as a parent or a child? Have books helped you make sense of your own life?



# AN INTERVIEW FOR WILD GAME BY ADRIENNE BRODEUR



***Wild Game* delves into your relationship with your complicated and charismatic mother, Malabar, and how she involved you in her extramarital affair starting when you were just fourteen. How did you know that now was the right time to tell your story?**

The night my mother woke me up to tell me that she'd been kissed by my stepfather's best friend, I was only fourteen and my life changed instantly. I went to bed as my mother's daughter and I woke up as her best friend and confidante, soon becoming a coconspirator in an epic love affair, participating in years of elaborate subterfuge, and not stopping to consider the consequences of my complicity. It took years to contemplate and process my story. Truthfully, I don't think I was ready to tell it until now. It wasn't for lack of trying.

As a teenager, I wrote about the situation in journals, and as an adult, I first tackled it in lighthearted personal essays, thinly veiled fiction, and a romantic comedy script. But there came a point in my life when it was clear that playing the story for laughs undermined the shame I felt, and the genuine pain I was in and had caused others. I also became a parent in 2005, and knew that I did not want to mother as I had been mothered. To protect my children, I realized I had to reckon with my past, understand the ripple effect of family secrets, and stop the intergenerational pattern of trauma (of which my mother's affair was not the only example) that existed in my family. Only then did I start to find the courage to confront my past head on, through memoir and in my own voice.

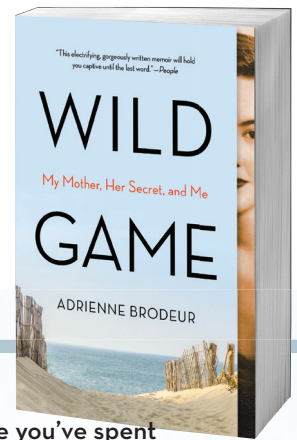
**You've said that you didn't want to write a *Mommie Dearest*. How is your mother-daughter story different?**

The mother-daughter relationship in *Mommie Dearest* is black and white. There's a villain and a victim, end of story. My goal with *Wild Game* was to explore the gray zone, the bits of villain and victim that reside in all of us. Early in the writing process, I read Vivian Gornick's *The Situation and the Story* and the following line stopped me cold: "For the drama to deepen, we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent." I taped that to my computer where I could consider it daily. My goal was to capture the truth of my relationship with my mother and write a nuanced book that explored our mutual humanity. In order to do that well, I couldn't vilify my mother and protect myself. I had to examine the whole of it—her history, my history, and our dynamic—and write specifically and truthfully to create a universal story.

**Can you talk a little bit about the title? Where did it come from?**

*Wild Game* was the title of a proposed cookbook that my mother and her lover—both married—came up with as a ruse for their affair. My mother was an expert chef who had a food column in the *Boston Globe* and wrote many cookbooks, and her lover was an avid hunter and fisherman who traveled the world in pursuit of these activities. The proposed wild game cookbook created a reason for the two couples to get together frequently: to test recipes. Her lover's job was to provide the game—venison, wild boar, squab; my mother's job was to create the feasts; and their unsuspecting spouses' jobs were to critique the results. In this way, they were able to carry out their affair in plain view for over a decade.

# AN INTERVIEW FOR WILD GAME BY ADRIENNE BRODEUR



You've lived in New York, Boston, and California, but much of the book is set on Cape Cod, where you've spent many summers. What makes Cape Cod such a special place for you?

Simply put, Cape Cod is home. There was not a ton of stability in my childhood. My parents had an acrimonious divorce when I was five, and each went on to marry two more times. For years, my brother and I were shuttled on Greyhound buses between parents and places, but throughout all of it, Cape Cod was the constant. To this day, I experience a physical reaction as I approach the canal. When the landscape starts to change a few miles before the bridge—and maple trees and murmurings of starlings give way to scrub oaks and seagulls, and the air turns brackish—I feel a loosening, an inner calm, a sense of peace.

What are some of your favorite memoirs? What did you turn to for inspiration when writing your own story?

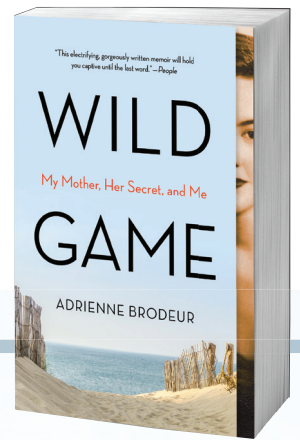
Like most writers, I read broadly, find inspiration in unexpected places, and owe a debt of gratitude to more books than I could ever possibly list. But specifically, if I kept a literary ledger of memoirs that I'm indebted to, it would include the following: Elizabeth Alexander's *The Light of the World*, Claire Bidwell Smith's *After This*, Gail Caldwell's *Let's Take the Long Way Home*, Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Nick Flynn's *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments*, Heather Harpham's *Happiness*, George Hodgman's *Bettyville*, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, Ann Patchett's *Truth & Beauty*, Nina Riggs's *The Bright Hour*, Darin Strauss's *Half a Life*, Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*. These memoirs (and others)—dog-eared, underlined, annotated—were within arm's reach as I wrote *Wild Game*.



SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

# WILD GAME

BY ADRIENNE BRODEUR



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ADRIENNE BRODEUR began her career in publishing as the cofounder, with filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola, of the National Magazine Award-winning *Zoetrope: All-Story*. She has worked as a book editor and is currently the executive director of Aspen Words.

To learn more, visit [AdrienneBrodeur.com](http://AdrienneBrodeur.com).

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

*Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* by Jeanette Winterson

*The Liars' Club* by Mary Karr

*The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls

*An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones

*The Mother Knot: A Memoir* by Kathryn Harrison

*Small Fry* by Lisa Brennan-Jobs

*The Descendants* by Kaui Hart Hemmings

*The Plimoth Plantation New England Cookery Book* by Malabar Hornblower

*The Whydah: A Pirate Ship Feared, Wrecked, and Found* by Martin W. Sandler

# The Power Pack

*Then Malabar ordered a power pack in her usual rapid-fire staccato: "A dry Manhattan. Standing up. With a twist. No ice. No fruit." When the waiter tilted his head quizzically, Malabar exhaled her annoyance and repeated the order at exactly the same speed as she had the first time. I asked for a Taj Mahal beer.*

My mother's Manhattan recipe was fairly standard, except that she tripled the typical amount of booze and never, ever added a cherry. If I were to hazard a guess — recipes were not Malabar's thing — it would go like this:

**4 – 5 oz. Maker's Mark bourbon**  
**1 oz. dry vermouth (she preferred Noilly Prat)**  
**2 dashes Angostura bitters**  
**1 cup ice**

**Place martini glass in freezer**

**Put ice in empty cocktail shaker**

**Add bourbon, dry vermouth, and Angostura bitters to ice-filled shaker, and shake until it starts to "sweat" on the outside (Malabar often would open the top, contemplate what was inside, and add another splash of booze)**

**Remove chilled cocktail glass and strain/pour Manhattan into it**

**Garnish with a lemon twist**



**SERVES 2**

→ **GLUTEN-FREE IF MODIFIED**

→ **DAIRY-FREE**

Total time: 30 MINUTES

RECIPE FROM *THE DEFINED DISH*  
BY ALEX SNODGRASS

# LINGUINE *with* CLAMS, CHILES, *and* SALAMI

- 1 tablespoon plus ½ teaspoon kosher salt
  - 8 ounces dried pasta, preferably linguine (use gluten-free pasta to modify)
  - 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
  - 2½ ounces dried Italian salami, casing removed, quartered lengthwise, and cut crosswise into ¼-inch slices
  - 3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
  - 1 Fresno chile, seeded and thinly sliced crosswise (or ½ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes)
  - ⅓ cup dry white wine
  - 1½ pounds littleneck clams, scrubbed clean
  - 1 (6.5-ounce) can chopped clams, undrained
  - ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
  - ¼ cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves
  - 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice (1 lemon)
- Freshly grated Parmesan, for serving (optional, omit for dairy-free)

To me, nothing is more romantic than a bowl of pasta. And if pasta is my love language, then this dish is definitely the key to my heart. I've taken classic linguine with clams and given it my own spin, spicing things up for date night with salami and Fresno chiles. If you love big, bold flavors like me, you'll just fall in love all over again when you share this dish.

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Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Once boiling, salt the water with 1 tablespoon of the salt and add the pasta. Cook according to the package instructions until al dente. Reserve ¼ cup of the pasta water, then drain the pasta and set aside.

In the same pot, heat the olive oil over medium heat until it shimmers. Add the salami, garlic, and chile and cook, stirring, until the garlic is golden and the chiles are tender, about 2 minutes. Raise the heat to medium-high and add the wine. Cook, stirring, until the wine reduces by half, about 2 minutes.

Add the clams and the canned clams and its juices. Stir to combine, cover, and cook until the clams open, about 6 minutes, giving the pot a gentle shake every so often during the process to help the clams cook evenly. Discard any unopened clams.

Return the pasta to the pot and add the remaining ½ teaspoon salt and the pepper. Using tongs, gently toss the pasta in the liquid until evenly coated. Add the parsley and lemon juice and toss once more. Add the remaining ¼ cup of reserved pasta water and continue cooking until the liquid reduces by half and the pasta has a nice light and creamy sauce. Adjust the seasoning with more salt if desired and top with Parmesan, if using. Serve immediately.



