

*seven*

*aunts*

*Staci Lola  
Drouillard*

AUTHOR OF  
*Walking the  
Old Road*

# A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *SEVEN AUNTS*

by Staci Lola Drouillard

## PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“*Seven Aunts* is a celebration of the women in Staci Lola Drouillard’s family who struggled to escape a daunting legacy with unsung courage, humor, and an unbreakable love for family. Far more than a family history, *Seven Aunts* is an honor song that reveals the everyday heroism of these women’s lives.”

—DIANE WILSON, author of *The Seed Keeper*

“Reading Staci Lola Drouillard’s *Seven Aunts* is a mesmerizing experience. A family story at once vast and intimate, it’s also a book about womanhood and mothering, the confluence of Native American and settler lives, and the resplendent, beautiful northern third of Minnesota, with all its warm homes and tangled family trees. Though these are not your aunts, you’ll wish they were; for all the wisdom and love they’ve shared in their remarkable, ordinary lives, you will.”

—PETER GEYE, author of *Northernmost*

“*Seven Aunts* gives us a unique and privileged insight to the intimate lives and history of a blended Indigenous and immigrant family in northern Minnesota. Staci Lola Drouillard has written with honesty and truth about ‘the treacherous beauty of life’ in a family rich in characters, in love and loss, all with great humor. Anaïs Nin wrote that reaching deep into the personal becomes universal. *Seven Aunts* is exactly that. It speaks to us of the universal love of family, the reality of historic social challenges, and the strength of the unbreakable bonds of knowing.”

—HAZEL BELVO, artist

“Staci Lola Drouillard explores the lives of her seven Anishinaabe and European aunties with fierce and unflinching admiration. Like a quilter sewing the final layer of a quilt, her detailed stitches reveal patterns that honor their harsh yet resilient lives. In the end, the reader gains a deeper appreciation for women’s survival along Minnesota’s North Shore and beyond.”

—NORA MURPHY, author of *White Birch, Red Hawthorn*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Staci Lola Drouillard**, a descendant of the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Anishinaabe, lives and works in her hometown of Grand Marais, Minnesota, on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Her first book, *Walking the Old Road: A People's History of Chippewa City and the Grand Marais Anishinaabe* (Minnesota, 2019) won the Hamlin Garland Prize in Popular History and the Northeast Minnesota Book Award for nonfiction and was a finalist for a Minnesota Book Award.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

They were German and English, Anishinaabe and French, born in the north woods and Midwestern farm country. They moved again and again, and they fought for each other when men turned mean, when money ran out, when babies—and there were so many—added more trouble but even more love. These are the aunts: Faye, who lived in California, and Lila, who lived just down the street; Doreen, who took on the bullies taunting her “mixed-blood” brothers and sisters; Gloria, who raised six children (no thanks to all of her “stupid husbands”); Betty, who left a marriage of indenture to a misogynistic southerner to find love and acceptance with a Norwegian logger; and Carol and Diane, who broke the warped molds of their own upbringing.

From the fabric of these women's lives, Staci Lola Drouillard stitches a colorful quilt, its brightly patterned pieces as different as her aunts, yet alike in their warmth and spirit and resilience, their persistence in speaking for their generation. *Seven Aunts* is an inspired patchwork of memoir and reminiscence, poetry, testimony, love letters, and family lore.

In this multifaceted, unconventional portrait, Drouillard summons ways of life largely lost to history, even as the possibilities created by these women live on. Unfolding against a personal view of the settler invasion of the Midwest by men who farmed and logged, fished and hunted and mined, it reveals the true heart and soul of that history: the lives of the women who held together family, home, and community—women who defied expectations and overwhelming odds to make a place in the world for the next generation.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The seven women profiled in the book were born into varying degrees of poverty. What are some of the reasons the Burge family's economic struggle was different from the Drouillard family's economic struggle? *Follow up question:* How have economic realities changed for rural families in the U.S. in 2022? If you feel they haven't, please discuss.

2. Faye was said to be afflicted with a condition the author calls the "morbidity of motherhood." Discuss the ways that girls like Faye are groomed for motherhood from a young age and how that expectation shaped Faye's life in both positive and negative ways. *Follow up question:* Do you think Faye was a good mother?

3. Let's talk about women and food, which is another important theme throughout the book. What are some of the stories related to food (and the eating, or not eating of it) that resonated with you? *Follow up question:* Is there an antidote to the phenomenon of "fatthrowing"?

4. Feeding people and "bringing warmth" is traditionally the work of women, especially for rural families with a lot of children. For both families profiled in *Seven Aunts*, food is also equated with love and affection. How was this dynamic problematic for Doreen, in particular?

5. The Drouillard family has a multi-cultural background, with a deep connection to Anishinaabe history on the North Shore. But unlike many Anishinaabe families, the Drouillards lived off-reservation, nearly forty miles from Grand Portage. What are some of the ways that life was unique for the Drouillards, in terms of the changing economics of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the social constructs of that time and place?

6. This is fundamentally a book about women, but to really understand the life stories presented in the book, we also must learn about the men in their lives. The fathers, brothers, and husbands. Take some time to discuss the role of men in each chapter of the book. *Examples:* What man played the biggest role in Faye's life? What man changed Lila's life the most? Who might Gloria have done best without?

7. The father-daughter dynamic is different for each aunt, from loving and kind (Faye and her father) to frightening (Gloria and her father). What were some of the challenges faced by these men that may have shaped their own family relationships? *Follow up question:* If *Seven Aunts* was a novel, would William Burge and Fred Drouillard be the villains of the story? Why, or why not?

8. In what ways does the book challenge how our society defines “normal” as it relates to the lives of women and girls? *Follow up question:* Is “chronic femininity” a thing of the past?

9. The battle for women’s rights and bodily autonomy continues to be fought, not just here in the U.S. but also around the world. As character studies for the future of women’s rights, how do the seven women profiled in the book fit into the larger discussion about women’s right to choose whether or not to have children (e.g. Carol’s experiences as an unwed mother in the 1950s)?

10. Diane, in particular, tried to break free of patriarchal expectations about women and what society views as “normative” culture. Do you feel that she was successful in doing that? *Follow up question:* Were there repercussions for any of the aunts when they tried to break free of societal expectations?

11. Talk about the role of truth-telling as it relates to family stories and women’s lives. Is there any danger in telling the truth? Why or why not?

12. These stories are specifically written as biographies rather than works of fiction. Based on your group’s discussion about the book, what are some possible reasons why the author chose that approach to writing about the lives of her seven aunts?





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**MORE INFO:**

[z.umn.edu/sevenaunts](http://z.umn.edu/sevenaunts)