

Reading Group Guide

1. Leah Carroll ends the prologue of *Down City* with a question that drives the narrative of the entire book: *Who were these people, my parents, and how did they come to this place?* Do you think she finds her answer? Is it possible to ever truly understand our parents and what they mean to us?
2. In a sense this memoir is more than a portrait of a family, it is also an indelible depiction of the tiny state of Rhode Island, one that teems with mob connections and blue collar workers. Do you think a place can become a character in a narrative? How does Providence change the people in *Down City* for better or worse? How is your hometown a part of your own story?
3. The story of Leah Carroll's parents inevitably comes back to addiction. In the case of Carroll's mother her life was stolen at such a young age, but with her father she experiences years of his struggles with substance abuse. Do you drink? Why or why not? Have you ever had troubling experiences with alcohol or drugs? What did you think about Carroll's relationship with her father? Have you ever had to confront a behavior like this in someone close to you that you found worrisome? Have you ever had to deliberately end a relationship, or choose to sustain one through a difficult time?
4. *Down City* is infused with research and background on Providence and Carroll's family and the other players in her parents' stories. Did this approach make Carroll's story more accessible? Have you read other memoirs about the same subject that don't go into such detail? Discuss the effectiveness of each.

5. When writing a memoir one inevitably has to write about real people, and in *Down City* Leah Carroll's immediate family plays a huge role in her coming of age story, especially those who stepped in in the absence of her parents. The author straddles the fine line of balancing memory and fact, as well as maintaining an emotional remove from the devastating details she uncovered about her mother's past. Do you think you could write about the people in your life? How would you feel having someone write about you? And what does a memoirist owe to their subjects—should this come before their own memories and the story they have to tell?

6. A major theme of this memoir is the concept of memory, who keeps it and whose version of events is the one that is told. Leah Carroll said she wrote this book because she wanted to tell the truest story of who her parents had been and what they'd meant to her. And maybe, a little bit, she wanted to remember them back into existence. Have you lost someone and wanted to keep a piece of them with you in some way? How did you remember them? Was it difficult, or necessary, or both? Discuss.

7. As the daughter of a mother who was a drug addict and a father who struggled with mental illness, Leah Carroll learned to embrace who she is and where she comes from without apology or shame. What areas in your own life would you like to better accept? Are there areas you are trying to change?