



Discussion Questions

Absolution by Alice McDermott

1. "Be a helpmeet to your husband. Be the jewel in his crown." (5) From sparkling conversations at garden parties to managing children, staff, and the day-to-day, what expectations land on a helpmeet? Why was Jackie Kennedy an attractive role model?
2. How does future and sometimes impending motherhood charm, delight, worry, and preoccupy Patricia? What interactions does she have with other children, and in what ways are they emotional for her?
3. Describe Peter and Patricia's love story-how did they meet, and how did their marriage evolve? What does she mean by "I told Peter's story, which was my own, and felt, what else to call it but patriotic pride" (32)?
4. "In those days, the war, Vietnam itself, was nothing at all like what it would become. Americans here were cautious, of course, hardly naive-there was barbed wire outside most every villa . . . We'd all read *The Quiet American*. *The Ugly American*, too." (32) Why are the American attorneys and professionals (and their families) in Vietnam? Are they aware of the crisis going on around them? What good works are they trying to do?
5. What is Charlene up to with the Saigon Barbie sales? (53) Why does she need Patricia's help? Are others aware of the work of her "cabal"? How does Charlene use directness to her advantage?

6. Discuss the role of faith-its structure, promises, miracles, comfort-for Patricia. How does Catholicism define the choices she makes? How does it shape Peter's?

7. "It seems quite possible that a mother's body, a mother's careworn face, would have been more beautiful to these peasant children than a slim teenage figure not unlike their own." (62) What does a mother's body represent?

8. What does Stella teach Patricia during their friendship? How does their friendship serve, test, and cause Patricia to grow? Why would Stella treat her like a sacrificial lamb?

9. Whom does the bodhisattva Jizo protect, and what does this figure represent for Patricia? Is Jizo a model for Charlene? Why do the women keep the baptism and burial after Patricia's miscarriage a secret?

10. How is Charlene both a comforting and positive force in Patricia's life and yet a steamrolling bully, pulling Patricia into her machinations? How do they both use and attract each other? Is that the nature of all the female friendships in the novel?

11. What are Stella and Patricia seeking on their road trip? Is it the same thing? Would you say Stella provokes trouble, and is it good trouble? Where is the line? How are the women of Saigon connected? When is that connection supportive and when is it exploitive? Does anyone see themselves as a "white savior"?

12. What does the dirty doctor's appearance mean to the volunteers? How does he impact the dynamic in the leper colony and on the ride home? What is appealing or appalling about him?

13. "A kind of resignation, a giving-in, nearly amused, to the paltriness of it, the human body, the monstrosity of flesh and bone." (201)

Fatima, postpartum shapes, bathing suits well filled or not, lepers, Barbies, miscarried cells, burn wounds, colicky babies-the book is all about bodies. How do these ideas about bodies create tension and celebration in the book? What other insights about the body surfaced for you?

14. "'None of us is unfettered, dear,' she said. 'Each of us is fettered in some way. You are constrained by love and obligation. You are not free.'" (225) In what ways is Lorraine right? How do we decide what we need to make amends for?

15. What does it mean to be absolved? What does the book title mean to you now that you have finished the book?

16. What became of Patricia and Peter's life after they left Vietnam? How did the conflict progress there? What legacy did the Americans leave behind?

17. "My life for my child's, my happiness for theirs. It's immediate. Instinctual, I guess. A mother will bear any pain, any loss, if it means her child will thrive." (220) Is this a good assessment of a mother's sacrifice? Why or why not?

18. How does Dom intersect with Rainey's adult life? What influence did Rainey's mother have on Dom?

19. Did Charlene live the life she wanted? Why or why not? How was she a complex creature?

20. How does Charlene's work provide Patricia with a child to adopt? Was it the right path of action or ethical? Did you agree with Patricia's decision regarding the infant or not?

21. "Each of us girls had some image of our mother, some broad caricature, that we wore pinned to our lapel, so to speak." (255) Does this idea speak to you? How can a mother also wear different identities at the same time?