

Reading Guide for If You Could See Me Now by Michael Mewshaw

About If You Could See Me Now

When Mike Mewshaw was a junior at the University of Maryland, a working class boy from a seriously broken family on the very bottom of a campus “social hierarchy as elaborate as the Indian caste system,” he fell madly in love with a gorgeous Brahmin from a prominent political family, with whom he became entangled in an intense and complicated romance. Shortly thereafter, she informed him that she was pregnant -- by an old boy friend. Encouraged by his mother, Mewshaw dropped everything to travel to Los Angeles, live with her, and see her through the last five months of her pregnancy and the placement of the baby for adoption. Thirty years later, a successful writer, the husband and father of two sons, he gets the phone call he realizes he has “been waiting for, half in dread, half in hope, for decades.” He is also distressed to discover that his name appears on the birth certificate. In recounting the subsequent ten year quest to set the record straight and help his surrogate daughter “Amy” find and communicate with her biological parents, Mewshaw takes us beyond the story of his problematic and life altering relationship with “Adrienne Daly” into the world of the “pre-60’s” 60’s, Kafkaesque adoption bureaucracy and red tape, the adoption rights controversy, family secrets and lies, and the fractured identities of all the players in this story, including his own. In his struggle “to understand the past and to weigh honestly my responsibility in those rights and wrongs” surrounding his relationship with Adrienne and its consequences, Mewshaw comes to terms with his own history of feeling “like an outsider, mystified about my origins, my name and the identity of my parents” and finds himself.

About the Author

Michael Mewshaw is the best-selling author of ten novels and six works of non-fiction, including two earlier memoirs. Although he directed the writing program at the University of Texas for five years and has done several visiting writers stints, including a year at the University of Virginia, where he took the Ph.D. in literature, Mewshaw has primarily made his living as a working writer, living mostly abroad. Married since the age of 24 to the same woman and the father of two grown sons, he prides himself on never having owned a home or furniture: “I’m not geared in that way. The picture I got of family life, of home ownership, living in the same town, was not a pretty one. I value my independence and I value my ability to live my life the way I want to live it.” Currently he winters with his family in Key West and summers in London.

Discussion Topics

1. According to Mewshaw, in the 1990’s “60 percent of Americans – more than 150 million people! – were adopted, had given up a child for adoption, had adopted a baby or had a close friend or family member who fell into the triad.” What are your experiences with adoption? How are your perceptions and attitudes about adoption and adoption related issues explored in this memoir? Did the memoir make you change your mind about any of those issues?

2. One reason Mewshaw wanted to tell this story was the belief that birth fathers should have a role to play in the adoption process, and that their perspective has been neglected, including the emotional impact upon them of relinquishing a child for adoption. How did you respond to hearing this story from the surrogate and biological father's point of view?

3. Mewshaw also observes that, for Catholics, confession is healing. "It's a chance to examine your conscience, review the past, and right old wrongs. In my case, it was also an opportunity to try to understand the past and to weigh honestly my responsibility for those rights and wrongs." Do you think that is what Mewshaw is trying to do in this memoir? If so, how well do you think he succeeded? How would you assess Mewshaw's willingness to expose his own sometimes less than flattering incidents and personality traits?

4. The subtitle of *If You Could See Me Now* is "A Chronicle of Identity and Adoption." What does Mewshaw mean by that? There may be several different ways that this is a book about identity. What might some of them be? In what unexpected ways do the facts of the adoption effect the subject of identity among all the characters? Are these obvious right away, or did they accrue and change as you read the book? Ultimately, whose story do you think Mewshaw is telling in this memoir?

5. When he meets her again after over 30 years, in London, Mewshaw tells Adrienne that she is "the heart of the story." What do you think he means by that? Do you agree with him? If you are familiar with the movie or story *Rashomon*, how does Mewshaw make narrative and ironic use of Adrienne's attachment to that story?

6. How does what Mewshaw subsequently learn about his own mother's past and his own ambiguous connections to his father effect his attitudes toward Adrienne, Amy, and his own sense of who he is?

7. Overall, how even handed, or not, do you find Mewshaw's portrayal of Adrienne, and why? Explore the irony of Dave's accounts of Adrienne and the Daly's with respect to what Mewshaw learns from it, and their differing attitudes towards Adrienne. How does the chronology of Mewshaw's acquaintance and subsequent relationship with Adrienne reinforce Dave's story and theories about his relationship with Adrienne and the Daly family dynamic?

8. Towards the end of Mewshaw's memoir, he describes himself as just having been "a ghost along for the ride." What do you think he means by that and how credible do you find that conclusion, based on his account of his relationship with Adrienne?

9. Some readers have commented that this memoir reads like a novel. Mewshaw makes a number of references about fictional narrative techniques, and even complains that he finds himself frustrated at times by the constraints of truth in shaping a memoir. Do you think he overcame those constraints? What fictional techniques, like foreshadowing, do you find in the way he tells this story?

10. At the same time, his sense of journalism demands recounting the facts as truthfully, even as painfully, as possible. What expectations do you bring to a book that describes itself as a “memoir?” What impact, if any, have recent stories about memoirs that turn out to contain a significant amount of fabrication had on your decision to read this book and/or your response to it?

Recommended Reading

The Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion

The Family Heart, Robb Forman Dew

“Rashomon” (the story), Ryunosuke Akutagawa

Lost & Found: The Adoption Experience, Betty J. Lifton, Dial Press, 1979

Journey of the Adopted Self: a Quest for Wholeness, Betty J. Lifton, Basic Books, 1994; 1995

Twice Born, the Memoirs of an Adopted Daughter, Betty J. Lifton, McGraw-Hill, 1975

An Interview with Michael Mewshaw

UB: When did you decide to write *If You Could See Me Now*, and why did you decide to make it a memoir, instead of a novel?

MM: I decided to write it last January, 2005, just over a year ago, but it had been brewing for a long time. I had tried to put something together in the way of a much broader memoir before, so *If You Could See Me Now* is a revision of a revision of a revision. Why a memoir rather than fiction? I had already written about these events fictionally. I felt the story was rich enough that it didn’t need to be fictionalized, that the back and forths, ins and outs, the reverses and advances that adhered to the facts were more interesting than I might fictionalize them.

UB: It reads like a novel, uses lots of fictional narrative techniques – the scene, foreshadowing. Was this a conscious choice or just the way the book “wrote itself,” so to speak?

MM: I think it may be a bit of both. It’s the way I approach narrative. I visualize scenes and episodes, so that as I am telling a story, whether I am writing a travel article, a sports article, or a literary profile, I tend to set things up scenically, to have there be a sort of dramatic arc to them. It’s the way I conceive of story telling.

UB: So you see yourself as a storyteller?

MM: Yeah, I do.

UB: Scenes recount long conversations, such as when you met with Adrienne in London. How did you remember that much detail?

MM: I have a very good memory. I am not sure whether I am cursed or blessed that way. I think most novelists do. It’s sort of a basic requirement. And I was educated in Catholic

schools, where there was a terrific emphasis on rote memorization. But the day I had that encounter with Adrienne, I came right home and wrote down as quickly and thoroughly as I could everything that happened, including phrases and exchanges we had had. Throughout the events of the memoir, I did make an effort in a contemporaneous way to record what was happening and to note down what was said and where the events took place and what my feelings were at the time. And of course I have siblings who help me correct my memories of things.

UB: You tell Adrienne that for you, writing is the way you know the world, so it does sound like you had been thinking about writing this story all along.

MM: This is not the first memoir I have done. I have been interested the form, and I sat down about 10 years ago and wrote down in an artless way an attempt to put down a sort of history of my life – some 600 pages. Straightforward, chronologically.

UB: Were there any elements beyond name changes that you felt like you had to change to protect others?

MM: I was concerned in the sense that I wanted to be responsible to the feelings of others, but I don't think I had any great fears. I want to emphasize here that in a memoir, it's my story, my life, a recollection of the past not in tranquility but under a kind of pressure that turns coal into diamonds. I am talking about the impact of these events on me more than anyone else, and Dave and Amy have read the book and liked it. That is important to me. What Adrienne's reaction will be I can't predict, but I wasn't doing this in a vindictive spirit, or to betray a confidence. I feel you get into a damned if you do damned if you don't situation. I made every effort to be accurate, and I would certainly take umbrage if someone accused me, because of my accuracy, of doing something wrong. We have just been through the whole James Frey issue.

UB: Does it seem that this memoir is much more a chronicle of identity than it is of adoption, *per se*?

MM: This was a story important to my development as a person and a writer, and I think it was also a story that had ramifications that went beyond that. What I learned was what a terrific impact these events had had on Dave that I'd have never known about. We toss a stone into the water and rings expand from it, and the effect that seemingly small events have, spread far and wide.

Part of the impulse for writing the book was to tell Amy, for instance, of the era into which she was born. I wanted to recapture the felt reality of what it was like to be alive in the early 60's before things really changed in the late 60's and the early 70's, before abortion was legal and when the Vietnam War was just heating up, when there was a different political and social context.

One of the great impulses for writing this story was that I felt it was a rather unique opportunity for a man to describe the process of adoption. I am not aware of any other

adoption book written by a man. The stereotype is of a woman, abandoned by the man, who goes off alone to have the baby, and chooses either to keep it or give it away. I have a feeling that although this particular book may be unique, I don't think the experience is unique. I think Dave's description of his heartfelt reaction to what happened is pretty representative. I think a lot of this is very hurtful and has enormous impact upon the men, too, and you don't often hear their point of view or discussion about the rights of men in these issues. The fact that Dave went on and raised a child alone and was willing to have done it before is pretty remarkable.

In writing it I certainly was conscious that the events I participated in, in California, were somehow mirrored by events in my own life. Certainly that the emotions I felt there were familiar to me. I empathized with Adrienne because I thought I understood what she was going through. She picked the wrong guy to tell that she was pregnant, the wrong man to come to for help or sympathy because of the way I was raised, the kind of person I am and the way I interpret implicit cries for help. My mother was the sort who felt deeply responsible for other people's problems. It still flabbergasts me that her immediate impulse was that I had to go help Adrienne. It must have been a haunting episode for her, because, as I found out years later, she had gone through the same thing as a young woman. Whereas I think you can be a good person, a moral person, an ethical person, and still insist on boundaries between yourself and other people, or insist on reasonable limits. I think if I were to talk with my sons, or someone else's sons in that situation I would say to them don't do it, it's not your place to do something like this and if you are going to do it the parents should be involved in some sort of reasonable way. It was a completely nutty thing for me to do.

UB: At one point you tell Adrienne that she is "the heart of the story." Her favorite reference point throughout is *Rashomon*. Have you thought about the unintentional irony of her fondness for that story? Adrienne's actions were effectively the equivalent of the rape in *Rashomon* in that each of the central characters in your story were in some way victimized by those actions.

MM: I was conscious of it, but I'm not sure she was. It made me wonder at the time whether she understood the full implications of that story. I don't think for a moment that she feels that she victimized anybody and I think that she feels victimized by others. She said to me, "I never did anything wrong."

UB: The difference between *Rashomon* and your memoir is that one of the tellers of the tale -- you -- tells it for all. Did that give you any pause about issues of narrative reliability?

MM: I think readers will think that I am a highly subjective narrator, but I was at pains to preclude that kind of doubt by including as much as I could of other people's testimony, including what Dave and Amy had to say. And I quoted from documents, like the adoption files. The real climax for me was to confront Adrienne with those files saying she was planning to go away with her grandmother, and had told me she wanted to marry

me. It still takes my breath away that within a month after the baby's adoption, I never saw her again.

UB: What about the risks of self exposure in the memoir?

MM: There's a risk of self-exposure in any kind of writing, and in the memoir you sort of raise the stakes. I was conscious that I could seem like a complete fool, an obtuse person. It's not the most complimentary thing to a man to think he could be so easily bamboozled by a woman.

UB: You're very hard on yourself in this book.

MM: Well I think it's true. I am very difficult to be around, temperamental. On the other hand I was in a pretty awkward situation. Was I riled up because that's just the way I am, or because I was with someone who at every turn was making the situation very difficult? I'm not an easy person. I'm a combative person, feisty, moody. I suppose one of the hardest things to admit was that I hit her. That's not something that's easy to admit, and its not easy for women who would read it to forgive.

UB: To what extent is any person writing a memoir a created persona?

MM: Yes, you have to shape events, you have to select, life doesn't have a coherent plot, you have to give it a shape, an arc, but what is the raw truth? I recognize that telling this memoir, or telling any story, requires the creation of a persona. I think this worries poor or uneducated readers, but Art is Artifice, not artificial. The creation of character is so important to the creation of fiction. But all of us create at least one character in our lives, and that's ourselves. We're constantly in the process of creating a character. And that character doesn't represent the whole of you. In fact, no one on earth will ever know everything that goes on in you and all the most innermost thoughts and contradictions and conflicts that exist in you. What I have done as a memoirist is create a persona of myself at particular moments in my life and I've tried as hard as I could to be as true to those moments as I can, but I recognize that it is selective and doesn't represent everything. It doesn't represent even on this particularly limited subject the last or only thing. There are other people who have their points of view and you always wonder and worry. I was worried Dave or Amy would say "that doesn't seem like me," or "you misrepresented what I said or did." I would predict that Adrienne would think I got it all wrong. But I look forward to her book.

--Conducted by Kay Callison, 3/5/06