

Discussion questions

1. The author, as a child, lived in a situation where things were hidden—her family’s life seemed normal on the surface, but extreme things were happening underneath. The book shows a child trying to make sense of this. Is covering up, pretending to be normal, a common experience?
2. The author has to imagine scenes before she was born; she tells you at the beginning that she has decided upon a strategy she calls “scrupulous imagination.” Do you think that such a thing is possible?
3. What are the risks of making things up? In memoir does a reader need exact truths, or is there an understanding between writer and reader that memoir is always a construct? Especially in a book such as *White Matter* that combines genres—memoir, essay, and story?
4. At one point, Minna’s “well of pity went dry”—what happens when people reach their limits?
5. Did you think Minna was right when she didn’t want Francie to see Harry at the end of his life? When Helen did? Where does compassion lie—with protecting people, or with giving them a chance to make their own decisions even if they will lead to suffering?
6. Could Francie have been saved if she hadn’t had the lobotomy? Might the passage of time, as Pauline says, have helped?

Might getting away from the family, as the author suggests, have helped? Or was her downfall inevitable?

7. What would you have done if faced with the decision about Bennie's treatment?
8. What would you have done fifteen years later, at the time of the decision for Francie's treatment?
9. What did you think when Janet felt sad at Walter Freeman's death? Was that sudden sadness, which surprised her, understandable to you after all the damage he had done?
10. Is there any other practice—medical or otherwise—where good intentions become mixed with personal motivations to dire effect?
11. Should medical professionals be trained to have less of a sense of entitlement? To have greater empathy with their patients?
12. Have you ever blamed people and then felt you were too harsh? Have you ever tried to swing in the other direction, to let people off the hook because you wanted to be seen as nice? What do you think of the author's desire to find a place between those poles?
13. How is it that good people can do bad things? Does this echo other situations? What has to be taken into account for something to be considered bad?
14. Have there been situations in your own experience that could not be made better by amassing more information?
15. Each of the sisters handles the aftermath of the tragedies in her own way: Minna by reflecting on it; Jen by avoiding it; Helen by living in the present. What do you think of these strategies for getting on with one's life?
16. "It was the times"—is that a good excuse for what happened to Bennie and Francie? Where does individual morality come into play?