

**Book Club Discussion Questions for *RETURN STROKE: essays & memoir* by DORA DUECK  
CMU Press 2022**

1. The question of how memory functions is central to many of Dora Dueck's essays. Discuss which essay comes close to your own experiences of the challenging task of accurate remembering.
2. "Notes Toward an Autobiography," the first essay, is a sometimes-playful exercise in telling a life story by way of food. What are some other innovative ways we could all attempt to write our life stories?
3. Dueck's childhood reading is scrutinized in "The Knot at the Beginning" and she feels the need to probe and explain her childhood favourites, feeling "perpetually attracted and alarmed" by her choices. What were your favourite books as a child and how do you feel about these books now?
4. The personal essay "Return Stroke" outlines the author's attempt to grasp the personality of her father-in-law, who died before she could know him. Dueck asks: "Is it possible to know someone you have never met?" What are the ways in which she finally does feel a connection with her husband's father?
5. The title of the book is taken from a form of lightning, which is discussed in the essay about her father-in-law, who survived being struck by lightning. "Return strokes heat the air and produce waves of pressure," Dueck writes. Think of several ways in which the metaphor of the lightning strike is helpful in illuminating the stories within this book.
6. In "Learning Geography," while recalling the accidental death of a schoolmate many years before, Dora Dueck writes, "But I've had the opportunity to live longer and will allow myself to feel the grief of it now, and so I grieve." Why do you suppose it takes decades for her to do this work of mourning?
7. Dueck mentions many authors whose work on memoir and biography have been important to her: Hermione Lee, Lauren Slater, Noelle Boughton, Janet Malcolm, Carolyn Heilbrun, and more. Have you read any of these authors and do you have similar responses to their work? Could you summarize Dueck's own position on biography?
8. In the essay "As He Lay Dying," Dora Dueck presents her husband's last weeks with directness. Why is this sort of courageous clarity so rare in our usual discussions of death?
9. The author has made a carefully considered decision not to give the names of her children, though they are important characters in the long memoir "In the House of My Pilgrimage." What are the pros and cons of naming people in memoir? What decision would you make?
10. Why do you think the author's time in Paraguay "was the most unusual, most interesting, thing she's done" ("Notes Toward an Autobiography"), even though her family stayed only two and a half years? What were the most unusual or interesting aspects of her life there?