



The House of Six Doors

— an autobiographical novel —
by Patricia Selbert

Reader's Guide

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THE HOUSE OF SIX DOORS READER'S GUIDE

The book narrates the immigrant experiences of three generations of women through the eyes of Serena, the protagonist. The author illustrates how language and culture have a profound effect on an individual and recounts the many difficulties an immigrant faces when they arrive in a new country: everything changes; nothing can be taken for granted or assumed. The author chronicles the transformation of each of the characters as they embark on the journey of living an American life. The questions are designed to assist the reader in examining the values and beliefs that are intrinsic to a country, a culture and a language.

1. Serena, as narrator and protagonist, is at the center of the House of Six Doors. She depends on every character in the novel. Is there a character (or characters) who depend on her? Why has the author chosen to construct Serena's relationships in this way? How does Serena relate to other characters towards the end of the novel, compared to the beginning?
2. Were Serena, her sister and her mother prepared for their journey to America? Could they have been better prepared?
3. Once they arrived in America were all their expectations met? How were their expectations met, and how were they disappointed?
4. How would you describe Serena's relationship with her mother? Why was the relationship between Serena and her mother the way it was? Would the relationship have been different had they not immigrated to the America?
5. Describe the relationship between Serena and Hendrika. How does the relationship develop as Serena grows older? How has coming to the United States influenced their relationship?
6. What is the function of the grandmother in the novel? How is she important to the trajectory of the story?
7. Why does Mama see the academic success (or failure) of her children both as a measure of her own worth and as something beyond her control? How does this dichotomy affect Mama's relationships with her children?
8. How are Serena's experiences in school a microcosm of her experiences as an immigrant in a new country? How does she deal with her difficulties at school? What prompts her to get support with her schoolwork? How does her view of education change? Whom does she get support from with her schoolwork?
9. Although the HSD opens with Serena's arrival in Florida from her home in Curaçao, this is by no means the first time that members of her family have moved to new countries. Indeed, Curaçao is described by one character as "my new home." Trace the paths traveled by different members of Serena's family.

10. There are constant comparisons between Curaçao and the United States, and Holland and the US. Which country do the comparisons favor? How does Serena feel about her new home? How do Serena's feelings change for Curaçao and for America? How much of the change is in Serena? How much of the changes occur on Curaçao and in America?
11. How does the author use color to describe settings and temperaments?
12. Every immigrant story is one of change. Explore some of the major changes that we see in HSD.
13. The chronological action of the novel is interspersed with vignettes from earlier times. How do the vignettes contribute to the main story? How do they shape our feelings about Serena and her family? What are some of the different perspectives brought to light in the main story and in the vignettes?
14. Mama is not a particularly likable character. What characteristics make her unsympathetic? What has made her this way? Does she have redeeming characteristics?
15. Oma is drawn as a "wise woman" who has spiritual knowledge and power. Her daughter tries to demonstrate similar powers. How is Mama's use of spiritual power different from Oma's? Why is Mama's use of power different than Oma's?
16. Oma knew the folkways of herbal healing. Mama was trained as a nurse and midwife in the Netherlands. How did these different forms of medical knowledge affect their relationship?
17. Mama immigrated to the Netherlands at the age of 17. Did that influence her relationship with her mother and why? How did it influence her outlook on life? How did it influence her relationship with her children?
18. How does Dona Dolores fit into the spiritual realm as the author conceives it? Could Mama or Oma have performed the rituals before they left for the US? Why did neither of them choose to do this?
19. Hendrika's camera serves several purposes in the novel. Describe some of them. How significant is it that we never see (or see described or mentioned) the photographs that she takes?
20. Mama's mental illness is euphemistically described as "periods of darkness" during which she could "harm herself." What effect does having an unstable single parent have on Serena's childhood and teenage years? What effects does having an unstable mother have on Hendrika and the rest of the siblings?

21. As a child in Curaçao, Serena watched American television programs, and it was from these that she got her idea of what life in the United States would be like. What expectations did she have, and how did they match up to reality?
22. Serena's first friends in the US (Inez and Sandu) are both immigrants. Ramón, who is the family's first point of stability in California, is also an immigrant. What is the significance of their choosing foreigners as friends? What do immigrants have in common? Why are Serena's first friends not American?
23. How does meeting Sandu change Serena's perspective on life and her future? How does Mama respond to Sandu? Why does she react this way? Why does Serena's perspective of Sandu change?
24. Serena's trip back to Curaçao to get her green card is, practically speaking, the biggest event in her life, but it is her conversations with Willia that are truly life-changing. How does her sister influence Serena's life after she returns to California? Why could Serena not perceive her opportunities before her conversation with Willia? Does receiving a green card have an influence on Serena's perception of her opportunities?
25. The novel is rife with racist incidents and attitudes. Consider some of the characters who inflict or suffer these attitudes. Why are they racist? Is it possible for them to change their beliefs? Have they suffered from any kind of racism themselves? What are the main emotions that accompany racism?
26. When Serena becomes pregnant, Sandu suggests that they run away to San Francisco and get married. Serena sees an abortion as the only viable alternative. Why does she think an abortion is the only viable option? What would Mama have thought if she knew Serena was pregnant? Which of them is right? How might life have turned out for them if they had followed Sandu's suggestion?
27. Mama accuses Serena of not loving her, even though it is untrue. Why does Mama feel unloved, and why is it difficult for Serena to express her feelings convincingly? How does Mama define love? How does Serena define love? How could they both feel loved?
28. The major characters in this novel are all female. Based on the male characters (excluding Sandu), what overall impression of men does Serena seem to have? How does this influence her feelings about Sandu? What feelings does Mama have about men? Do Mama and Serena have the same feelings about men?
29. What does Mama want from life and why? By what means does she expect to achieve it? Is she successful in attaining her goals? Are Mama's expectations of life a result of the traumas she has suffered?

30. How did the songs from the seventies influence the story? Did the author use the songs to emphasize an emotional tone or to bring back the atmosphere of the era?

31. Do Serena's memories of Curaçao match the realities she encounters when she returns? Has Curaçao changed or has Serena changed? How has Serena changed? How has Curaçao changed?