

READING GROUP GUIDE

*DIARY OF A STAGE MOTHER'S
DAUGHTER: A Memoir*

By Melissa Francis



WEINSTEIN
BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Glass Castle meets *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* in this dazzlingly honest and provocative family memoir by the former child actress (*Little House on the Prairie*) and current Fox Business anchor Melissa Francis.

When Melissa Francis was eight years old, she won the role of a lifetime: playing Cassandra Cooper Ingalls, the little girl who was adopted with her brother (played by young Jason Bateman) by the Ingalls family on the world's most famous prime-time soap opera, *Little House on the Prairie*. Despite her age, she and her older sister, Tiffany, were already veteran actresses, their success fueled by the fear, pride, pressure, and sometimes grinding cruelty of their starstruck mother. As Melissa's star rose, however, her sister's dimmed—Tiffany began to shy away from show business, and in doing so became invisible to her mother, who paid little attention to whether her elder daughter made it to school each day, and who later turned away when Tiffany's emotional problems and substance abuse turned deadly.

Diary of a Stage Mother's Daughter is a fascinating account of life as a child star in the 1980s, particularly as a cast member of the legendary *Little House on the Prairie*. It is also a startling account of life in a dysfunctional family under the care of a highly neurotic, dangerously competitive “tiger mother.” But perhaps most importantly, now that Melissa has two sons of her own, it is a meditation on motherhood: How hard should you push a child to succeed, and at what point does your help turn to harm?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Francis, the Fox Business anchor, did not get her start on television in news. At the age of eight, she played Cassandra Cooper Ingalls on the world's most famous prime-time soap opera, *Little House on the Prairie*, working alongside 1980s icons Michael Landon, Melissa Gilbert, and Jason Bateman.

In her book *Diary of a Stage Mother's Daughter*, Melissa recounts her life as a child star in the 1980s. Melissa eventually left acting, earned a degree in economics from Harvard University, and went on to a successful career as a broadcast journalist. Today, she lives in New York City with her husband and two children, and anchors two daily shows on the Fox Business network, including *Money with Melissa Francis*, which covers the intersection of Wall Street and Main Street, and *Markets Now*. Before her role at Fox Business, Melissa spent nine years at CNBC, where she anchored shows such as *Power Lunch*, *The Call*, and *On the Money*, and made regular contributions to the *Today* show and *Weekend Today*.

Melissa Francis enjoys discussing her book with her readers and is available for book club meetings as her schedule permits. If your book club would like to schedule a phone or Skype interview with her, please direct your request here: <http://www.melissafrancisofficial.com/contact.php>

For more information, please visit: <http://www.melissafrancisofficial.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MelissaFrancisFOX>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MelissaAFrancis>

AUTHOR STATEMENT

For decades I have kept the truth of my childhood a secret, even from my closest friends. When I put my story down on paper in *Diary of Stage Mother's Daughter*, I at last could breathe, not only because I finally owned and embraced where I came from, but because of the support showered on me by complete strangers. It turns out that I was far from alone in having a troubled past. Judging by the letters, emails, and even tweets I have received, I now realize that nearly every family has a dramatic, heartrending story; that every person has suffered through their own trials. We could all write a book!

What counts is what we do now—how we move forward.

Rather than carrying pain around and allowing it to paralyze us, I suggest that even the rawest of memories can be harnessed as a richness of experience to draw on. For me, I know how *not* to raise my sons. I took control of my history, stopped the cycle in its deadly tracks, and chose to take a different path into the future. I demanded a different relationship with my mother, and when she refused, I moved on to a new life. It was both a terrifying and a liberating choice. But it changed my life.

Now that I have kids of my own, I know that my biggest wish for them is not success. It's happiness—whatever that means for them. My job as their parent is to help them figure out what will make them truly happy adults, and I strive for that each and every day.

I'd love for anyone who reads my book to feel that they can learn from a challenged past and move forward toward a joyful future. You can choose to be happy, no matter where you've been or where you've come from. It's never too late.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the biggest differences between Melissa and Tiffany and when do they start becoming clear?
2. How did you feel toward Melissa's father? Did your reaction to him change as the book progressed?
3. How were problems or arguments typically handled in the Francis home?
4. Whether it was the achievements of her children or the cars in the driveway, Mom was determined to project an image of success, despite what was going on at home. Are there moments when the private and public images of the Francis family come into conflict?
5. Mom tells Melissa she loves her at several points, yet one of Melissa's final thoughts in the book is "I can love, even though I was not ultimately loved myself." How are their two versions of love different? What has Melissa learned from her difficult childhood?
6. Discuss Melissa's account of her wedding to Wray and the events leading up to it. In what ways did her family affect her experience of this major event?
7. Melissa often describes Mom's erratic, hurtful, and sometimes violent behavior as she strove to anticipate her moods and minimize the damage. Have you ever had to deal with someone as unpredictable as Mom? How would you have handled some of the ordeals Melissa faced growing up?

8. Mom never responds to Melissa's ultimatum after Tiffany's death and Melissa refrains from attempting to explain her mother's behavior. How did you react to Mom's final abandonment of Tiffany? How did you interpret her decision?
9. Melissa shares her memories of many highs and lows as a child star. Do you think the environment she describes on Hollywood film sets was a positive one?
10. Why do you think writing this book was important for the author? How do you think it might have felt to open up about these experiences after a lifetime of giving "non-answers" about her past?
11. What lessons might parents take from this book? If you're a parent, were there moments that particularly resonated for you?
12. If you could ask Melissa one question, what would it be?

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“What makes the book so compelling aren’t just the behind-the-scenes details but the spirited conclusion: Francis cut all ties to her mother and made her own life, first at Harvard and later in broadcast journalism.”

—*Entertainment Weekly* (Grade: A–)

“[A] superb family memoir”

—*The Washington Post*

“Francis’ narrative grabs readers immediately. . . . One of those intimate, heartbreaking, double-edged stories that is hard to read, impossible to put down.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“In this engaging memoir, Fox News financial reporter Francis recalls her heyday on the child-actor circuit. As Michael Landon’s adopted daughter Cassandra in *Little House on the Prairie*, she knew how to cry on cue—but it was her demanding and over-sensitive mom who was the family drama queen.”

—*People Magazine* (3 out of 4 stars)

“Compelling . . . A thoughtful trek across a troubled family landscape resulting in a bittersweet yet hopeful final act.”

—*Publisher’s Weekly*

“A quick but heartbreaking guide for how not to raise children.”

—*USA Today*

“I am always in search of the book I can’t put down. Well, thanks to Melissa Francis, I FOUND it. . . . Her book is captivating, revealing and ultimately healing. Who knew the kid from *Little House on the Prairie* had such a fascinating real-life story? I am in awe.”

—Hoda Kotb, host of the *Today* show

“Melissa Francis’ story is riveting. The book is the perfect antidote for the ‘Tiger Mom’ syndrome that seems to be gaining traction in today’s society. . . . If you want to be inspired to reach beyond what you were taught as a child, get this book now.”

—Melissa Gilbert, author of the bestselling
Prairie Tale: A Memoir

“Really powerful reading... Melissa has eloquently told the difficult and disturbing story of how a mother’s absolute, unrelenting narcissism led her to sacrifice the well-being of both of her children. Melissa has triumphed heroically over her circumstances.”

—Alison Arngrim, author of
Confessions of a Prairie Bitch

“Melissa Francis spares no one—including herself—in this compelling story. She shares important lessons hard-won at her maddening mother’s side, and offers an important cautionary tale for any family with big dreams for its children.”

—Laurel Saville, author of *Unraveling Anne:
A Memoir of a Mother’s Reckless Life and Tragic Death*