

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

## WHY SINÉAD O'CONNOR MATTERS

*WHY SINÉAD O'CONNOR MATTERS* argues that its subject has been repeatedly manipulated and misunderstood by a culture that is often hostile to women who speak their minds (in O'Connor's case, by shaving her head and tearing up a picture of the pope on live television). Author Allyson McCabe details O'Connor's childhood abuse, her initial success, and the backlash against her radical politics without shying away from the difficult issues her career raises. A journalist herself, McCabe exposes how the media distorts not only how we see O'Connor but how we see ourselves, and weighs the risks of telling a story that hits close to home.

A COMPANION TO  
*WHY SINÉAD  
O'CONNOR  
MATTERS*  
BY ALLYSON  
McCABE

AVAILABLE NOW



# BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Allyson McCabe tells us that her former perceptions of Sinéad O'Connor were filtered through the media as well as through her own experiences. Have you ever experienced a similar realization about how you saw a public figure?
- 2.** McCabe expresses doubt about the possibility of any journalist maintaining pure neutrality and shows how that played out in her first attempt to tell O'Connor's story. What are some of the potential risks and rewards of taking a different approach—one that openly acknowledges how a reporter relates to a story?
- 3.** As McCabe recounts the difficult circumstances of O'Connor's early life, she also revisits parts of her own childhood and adolescence. Identify instances where shame emerges in this book, and how it influences our perceptions. Are there parts of your own story that are difficult to share with others? Why?
- 4.** McCabe describes some of the qualities that helped to propel O'Connor onto the world's stage and foreshadow the backlash that would follow. What are some of the key differences between O'Connor and contemporaneous artists such as Madonna that explain how they were seen and treated differently by the press and the public?

**5.** O'Connor was widely condemned for expressing her preference that the national anthem not be played before her show and for pulling out of a 1990 appearance on SNL. In both cases, her detractors accused her of "censorship." In what ways does McCabe suggest that O'Connor, in fact, was being censored?

**6.** McCabe contextualizes O'Connor's solidarity with Black artists by discussing the racial segregation of the radio dial and MTV's early refusal to play videos by Black artists. What role does she believe racism played in O'Connor's cancellation?

**7.** In what ways does McCabe consider the runaway success of "Nothing Compares 2 U" both a blessing and a curse for O'Connor?

## WATCH

<https://youtu.be/X0VpfiMcPPA>

"War," Saturday Night Live, 1992

**8.** How did McCabe's discussion of Connor's 1992 SNL performance differ from other accounts you may have seen or read, and how did it affect the way you interpreted it?

**9.** McCabe charts how O'Connor's commitment to making music was overshadowed by the relentless focus on her controversies, including some of her own making. How does McCabe connect some of O'Connor's actions and statements to her experiences as a survivor of childhood trauma? What role does she suggest the media and the public played in perpetuating that trauma?

**10.** McCabe points out that women are held to a different standard than men, but also shows how women were complicit in bringing O'Connor down. What jumps out at you in terms of possible explanations for why that happened?

**11.** McCabe suggests that O'Connor's mental illness has often been used to invalidate her, including the widely held view that her claim of having been assaulted by Prince is categorically false. What are your thoughts on how this has affected her credibility?

### **WATCH**

<https://youtu.be/O-EF60neguk>

“Nothing Compares 2 U,” 1990

**12.** McCabe says “if we love the tear O'Connor sheds in the video for ‘Nothing Compares 2 U,’ we also have to be willing to acknowledge the pain that provoked it.” What does she mean? What impact might that approach have on society, particularly with respect to how we deal with generational trauma?

**13.** McCabe says her goal is not to justify or excuse everything O'Connor has ever said or done, but to defend her right to be imperfect. What are your thoughts about cancel culture? Can you identify instances in which cancellation is justified and others in which you feel it's unwarranted?

**14.** As she begins to close the book, McCabe tells us how she came to realize that being a truth-teller as a journalist required her to reveal parts of her own story, too. Did doing so alter the way you saw her as a narrator, and if so, how?

**15.** At the end of the book, McCabe asks what it would be like if a choir of millions of Sinéads burst out from all the rooms where they've been locked away and silenced, finally hearing and supporting each other. Are there times in your own life when you've felt silenced or unheard? What have you been holding in that you wish you could release?

# NOTES