

## NOT MY FATHER'S SON READING GROUP GUIDE

### Questions for Discussion

1. In *Not My Father's Son*, Alan Cumming tells the story of two shocking discoveries involving his father and grandfather. What were these secrets and what repercussions did they hold for Alan and his family? Think about the two men—Alex Cumming and Tommy Darling. How did both men influence—both directly and indirectly—the person Alan is today?
2. Describe Alan's father. What kind of relationship did he have with his sons and his wife? How can an adult behave the way he did with his children? What coping mechanisms did Alan use to survive his father's violent personality? How did he learn to overcome his past—and use it to create the life he has now? How did his experience with Alex affect Alan's desire to have children earlier in his life?
3. Why do you think Alan's father chose to tell Alan about his parentage when he did? Why was he originally going to wait until his death? How does Alan react to the news? Do you think that Alan's father wanted to believe that Alan was not his son? Why did he keep his secret for most of Alan's life? Do you think it was a catalyst for his behavior toward Alan, or would he have been as cruel even if he believed Alan was his own? What is both his and Alan's reaction when they discover the truth?
4. What happened when Alan and his brother, Tom, confronted their father about his abuse? How did Alex Cumming react? Do you think they got through to their father—did he understand why they came to him? How much is Alex a product of his time and place? Do you think he regretted not having a better bond with his sons, or was that just the kind of man he was?
5. Alan writes, "All I know is that I am the product of all the experiences I have had, good and bad, and if I am in a happy place in my life, (as I truly am), then I can have no regrets about any of the combination of events and circumstances that have led me to the here and now." How did Alan come to such clarity in his life? Do you believe that uncovering the truth of the past set him free?
6. Discuss Alan's grandfather, Tommy Darling. Are there similarities between him and his grandson? How does he compare with Alex Cumming? How did both Tommy Darling and Alex Cumming react to the setbacks—both perceived and real—in their lives? How did finding the truth about his grandfather's life and death impact Alan's perceptions of who he is?
7. Many people think of actors as being shallow or narcissistic. How does Alan's memoir belie this impression? What three adjectives would you use to describe the Alan Cumming you met in these pages?

8. Not My Father's Son is a story of family. What defines family? How much is a person a product his own flesh and blood and the environment in which he was raised—and how much is he his own person? What makes a good parent? What makes a good partner?
9. Alan's memoir is also a story of secrets and their power to hurt. Alan offers heartfelt advice: "go into the unknown with truth, commitment, and openness and mostly you'll be okay." Do you agree with this? What would happen if everyone tried to tell the truth? Are there some secrets that should be kept? Do you concur that "there is never shame in being open and honest"? Why do many people find it difficult to tell the truth?
10. Talk about how Alan tells his story, alternating between past and present. What does the structure add to the narrative?
11. What lessons or insights did you discover reading Not My Father's Son?