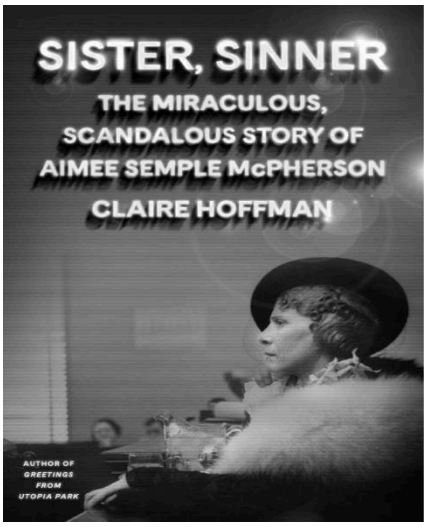
New Castle Public Library Book Group
New Castle Public Library
Wednesday, November 4, 2026
10:30 AM—12:00 PM
Prepared by Dr. Alison McNeal

Claire Hoffman: *Sister, Sinner: The Miraculous, Scandalous Story of Aimee Semple McPherson*



Claire Hoffman Brief Bio:

- **B.** Mar. 5, 1977, and is listed by Wikipedia as a journalist, author, and assistant professor of journalism at University of California, Riverside.
- Her hometown of Fairfield, Iowa, with a population of less than 10,000, is home to a Center for Transcendental Meditation and home of Maharishi International University, founded in 1971 by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.
- Her mother was divorced and a member of the Transcendental Meditation movement which had about 900,000 adherents in 1977 and about 5,000,000 now. The organization has used contemporary forms of communication for its message.
- Her education:
    - Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment
    - University of Chicago, School of Divinity
    - Columbia University School of Journalism
- Her works:
    - Most famous essay, “Baby Give Me a Kiss,” for the *L. A. Times,*profiled pornographer, Joe Francis, founder of *Girls Gone Wild*
    - Her first book, *Greetings from Utopia Park: Surviving a Transcendent Childhood*, 2016, is a memoir based on her experiences growing up in the Transcendental Meditation movement in Fairfield, Iowa.

Opener: #1: List three things that surprised you about the book on a note card with page references if at all possible so that we can read a passage or two together. Pick only one thing to share with the group.

#2: List Aimee's positive and negative traits in two separate columns. What did she most want out of life? Was she strongest as a religious leader, a performer, a business woman or other? Why do you think the author chose the words "Sister, Sinner" for the title?

Specific Questions: from https://chatgpt.com/s/t_6ad3008cce848191a8b6cd44f1945ade

Faith, religion, and ambition

1. Do you believe Aimee's religious convictions were sincere? How do her religious convictions compare with her mother's?
2. What made Aimee so appealing to her followers? Was it her message, her personality, her theatrical style, or her ability to connect with people?
3. How might Aimee's personal relationships have been affected by her extraordinary public life?
4. How did Aimee use the new technologies and mass communications of her time to spread her religious message? What parallels do you see with today's televangelists and social media personalities?
5. Where should we draw the line between making a religious message accessible and turning religion into a performance?
6. Were Aimee's supporters justified in their devotion to her, even when questions arose about her personal conduct?
7. Did you feel sympathy for Aimee at any point? Did you feel critical of her? What caused those reactions?

The disappearance and the scandal

1. When Aimee disappeared in 1926, what explanations seemed most plausible to you? Did your theory change as the story unfolded?
2. Why did her disappearance capture so much public attention? Would the story have attracted the same attention if she had been an ordinary woman rather than a famous evangelist?
3. How did the accusations and investigations affect Aimee's reputation and her religious movement?
4. Do you think the public was more interested in discovering the truth or in witnessing a scandal?
5. After reading the book, do you feel you know what really happened to Aimee? Or does the mystery remain unresolved in your mind?

Celebrity, the press, and public judgment

1. How much responsibility did newspapers and other media have for shaping public opinion about Aimee?

2. Were reporters primarily trying to uncover the truth, or were they taking advantage of a sensational story?
3. How did being a woman in the public eye affect the way Aimee was judged? Would a male religious leader have been treated differently?
4. Do we hold celebrities and religious leaders to higher moral standards than we hold ourselves or other people?
5. What similarities do you see between Aimee's experience and the treatment of public figures today? Has the media environment changed, or has human curiosity about scandal remained the same?

The author's approach

1. Did Claire Hoffman present Aimee fairly, in your opinion? Did you feel the author was sympathetic, skeptical, or deliberately neutral?
2. How did the author's use of historical details help you understand the period in which Aimee lived?
3. Did the book read more like a biography, a mystery, a history of American religion, or a study of celebrity? Which aspect was strongest?
4. Were there places where you wanted more evidence, explanation, or insight into Aimee's private thoughts?
5. What do you think the author ultimately wants readers to understand about Aimee and the society that made her famous?

7. Questions to end the discussion

31. Can someone be both a saint and a sinner? What does Aimee's story suggest about the difficulty of separating the two?
32. Should a person's accomplishments be judged separately from their personal failings? How would that apply to Aimee?
33. What does this story tell us about the human desire to believe in extraordinary people?
34. What lesson, if any, can modern religious leaders, politicians, and celebrities learn from Aimee's life?
35. Would you recommend this book to someone else? What would you tell that person to look for while reading it?