

READERS GUIDE

Nancy Thayer on Sisters

In a catalog, I read this message needlepointed on a pillow: “Fate made us sisters, Hearts made us friends.” Such a sweet sentiment, but to my way of thinking not entirely accurate. If I needlepointed a pillow, it would read: “Sisters are created by genetics . . . but also by shared memories, passing years, and forgiven arguments.” Okay, probably too much for a pillow.

My inspiration for *Island Girls* came from the realization that my nine-years-younger, blue-eyed, blond, spoiled little brat of a sister grew up to be one of my best friends. I was fiercely jealous of her when I was young. But as adults, we grew close, partly by sharing humorous memories about our childhood spats and our clueless too-strict parents.

On page 218 of *Island Girls*, Jenny thinks,

“She had had so little of this fierce thrust and yank of family altercation, the daily squabbling, making up, hugging, laughing, bickering, fussing, stomping, snorting, and simple collapsing side by side on the sofa . . . Now she saw how it made people whole, how life was made of dark and light, yin and yang, quarrels and peace. This was how a person learned to forgive.”

What makes a sister? There are a few women friends whom I consider my sisters, and not just because we’ve shared all-night laughing, sobbing, confessional sessions involving wine and chocolate. Not even because we’ve seen each other through seriously heartbreaking ordeals. Along the way, we’ve also had serious disagreements and snarling arguments—the sort of harrowing tests that make or break a tight connection.

I have a best friend, Jane. In our thirties, Jane and I were hiking in Scotland when we got hopelessly lost. She insisted on reading the map when I knew I could read it the right way. We were hungry, thirsty, cranky, and sure we’d never find our way out. We’d die among the trees, our starved bodies trampled by Highland coos and pecked clean by ravens.

I finally plopped down, exhausted, behind a bush. “Go on,” I told her. “*Just go on.*”

Jane stomped off.

I thought of all the things about her that made me furious—how she’s disorganized, impatient, and bossy. Then, after a time, I admitted to myself that I’m also disorganized, impatient, and bossy. I staggered through the thickets and eventually found the way out,

and my friend was waiting there. We looked at each other with dirt on our faces and leaves in our hair and burst out laughing.

But when we travel, she *still* insists on reading the map. Jeez Louise!

I have a crush on Russell Crowe. Jane calls Russell Crowe “greasy.” What? *Greasy*? Russell Crowe? She thinks the same of Sandra Bullock, which drives me out of my mind, because I adore Sandra Bullock. She thinks I don’t get off Nantucket enough. I feel she *never* comes to visit me on the island. (She was here last week.) She loves jazz. I don’t. She wants to change—in her mind, *correct*—the punctuation in my books. I want my prose and commas just as they are. She hates breakfast and stays up till one in the morning. I love a hearty breakfast and am snug in bed at ten. Oh, yes, and like my birth sister, she’s younger, blue-eyed, and blond. *Eye-catcher*. Not that I’m jealous.

Jane is brilliant, articulate, and incredibly generous. She’s endlessly kind. Most of all, she’s hysterically funny. My husband always knows when I’m talking on the phone with Jane because I’m shrieking with laughter. Best of all, we share memories of days long ago when we were divorced from our first husbands and were single women with little children in a conservative town. I baby-sat her daughter the day she got divorced. She traveled with me to Milwaukee where I spoke about my newest book for a library. Later that day, as we crossed the wide street in front of the library, a policeman roared up on his motorcycle and, nearly spitting with fury, arrested us—for jaywalking. She’s the only person with whom I’ve ever been arrested. A definite bonding moment.

She is, as they say, like a sister to me. We share memories, we’ve had disagreements, we’ve laughed till our sides ached. I would do anything for Jane, and I know she would for me—except watch a movie starring Russell Crowe and Sandra Bullock! But these are minor disagreements. Many women I talk to say that the more profound issues of money, men, and children can be relationship breaking points. If your sister marries a wealthy man who buys a mansion and treats his family to educational cruises to the Galapagos while your own husband has lost his job and your child needs expensive physical therapy, can you still remain true sisters? I asked my daughter, who has only one brother, what makes a sister. She said, “Tactlessness.” I would like to think she meant *honesty*, and if so she’s right. You can say to a friend, “That dress makes your butt look big,” but only to a *sister* can you say, “Um, could I point out . . . the clothes you buy for your daughter accentuate her weight problem.” If we can share the pains and sorrows, if we can fight and then forgive, if we can admit we have differences but promise we’ll still be there holding hands in the hospital room or retirement home, if we can be our *truest worst and best selves* together, we are sisters.

In my new novel, *Nantucket Sisters*, I explore these questions of belonging, insulting, arguing, separating, and forgiving. Two young women, one wealthy, one not, meet as children and discover they’re kindred spirits. In *Island Girls*, three women manage to forgive and overcome and forge a lasting sisterhood. In *Nantucket Sisters*, that wonderful bond is tested by different stresses—circumstance and class and money and

men! That's taking an age-old conflict to a whole new level. Fasten your seatbelt, sister.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Arden, Meg, and Jenny come from what can be called a "blended" family. Do you know any families like this?
2. Do you think the relationship of sisters in a family whose parents never divorce is easier/less complicated/more loving than that of sisters in blended families?
3. The flap copy of *Island Girls* says: ". . . the push and pull of family altercations make us whole." Do you agree?
4. Did you identify with any of the three young women? If so, which one? Why?
5. Did you identify with any of the three older women? If so, how?
6. How would you match these qualities to these mothers:
Nora Romantic
Justine Martyred
Cyndi Practical
7. Towards the end, the mothers get together at the Nantucket house and end up being friends, or at least friendly. Is this realistic or idealistic?
8. Was Justine justified in exiling the two girls? Was she right to keep the information about Jenny's natural father from her? Would you have done the same?
9. One of the themes in the book is that of self-esteem. Meg's lack of self-esteem prevents her from believing Liam could love her. On page 238, Justine's lack of self-confidence made her want to get Meg and Arden out of her life. Do you think women let the lack of self-esteem influence crucial life choices more than men do?
10. Do you think the women of the Rory Randall fan club made the right decision about helping Marcia? What would you have done?

11. Arden, Meg, and Jenny all have work they love. Which woman do you think is most likely to have children? Which woman is least likely?

12. If you had three months—or even one week—to vacation on Nantucket, away from work, home, and everyday worries, lying on a beach in the sun or walking on the beach looking at the stars, would it change anything in your life?