

## READERS GUIDE

### Nancy Thayer on the inspiration for *Nantucket Sisters*

During the thirty years I've lived on Nantucket, I've seen new people move to the island, and old friends leave. An island is an odd place to live, especially this island, so crowded in the summer when the beaches are golden, so lonely in the winter when gale force winds blow. I've watched my children, my friends' children, and my godsons grow up. I've seen friendships and romances bloom and fade.

My inspiration for writing *Nantucket Sisters* was a special friendship between my daughter and her best friend Sara. The two met at the age of five in Williamstown, Massachusetts. When I married Charley four years later, we moved to Nantucket and Sam was heartbroken to leave Sara. But Sam always went to visit Sara, and Sara came every summer to visit us. Even once they headed off to college, Sam bound for Smith and Sara for Trinity, each often made the short drive to visit the other.

More years passed. Sara met Aaron, a musician. Sam was maid of honor at the wedding. But soon Sara and Aaron moved out to the west coast, to Oregon. The drive wasn't so short anymore and Sara stopped coming to visit in Nantucket. Between her job and Aaron's course load in graduate school, Sara couldn't make it to Sam's wedding a few years later. *Well, I thought, there you are: time—and men—can weaken or even end a relationship.* But during all the years and miles and different lives between them, Sam and Sara continued calling, emailing, and visiting when they could. They have two boys of the same age, and the boys are good friends.

Watching this friendship evolve over the years sparked the idea of a book about two girls who meet when they are five years old and remain friends through all sorts of life changes. That book turned into *Nantucket Sisters*.

When *Nantucket Sisters* was published in 2014, Sam was pregnant with her fourth baby, her husband was running a lab and teaching full time at U.Mass/Amherst, and they had three children, aged eight, six, and four. The other births had been, if not easy, normal. This time, there was a chance of pre-eclampsia, and Sam's labor had to be induced early. I got out to Hadley as fast as I could.

And so did Sara! When Sara heard the news, she packed her bags, flew to Hartford and drove up to Hadley, where she bought groceries and swept into the house like a young Mary Poppins. Within minutes of setting down her bags she started a hearty vegetarian chili. She entertained the children and took care of them while I drove to the Holyoke Birthing Center to see my daughter and her husband and their healthy new baby. The next day, Sara visited Sam herself and brought her homemade vegetarian food and balloons. The girls had a good long cry.

So did I, looking through old pictures of Sam and Sara throughout the years. Here were Sam and Sara playing with dolls in Williamstown. And there they are building sand castles on the beach in Nantucket. They both looked so beautiful at Sara's wedding, and Sara was all that was missing from Sam's. Now I have pictures of Sara hugging Sam at the hospital, celebrating a new member of our family. I look forward to many more photos—and inspiration for books—to come.

### Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Maggie and Emily come from two different worlds—while Maggie’s family lives on Nantucket year round, Emily is whisked off to a very different island, New York City, at the first sign of the summer’s end each year. Although the two girls build a world of their own each summer as “Nantucket sisters,” eventually the outside world lets itself in. Do you think Maggie and Emily are their best selves together? Have you ever had a friendship with someone from a different background? Did it make you see the world differently?

2. Emily and Maggie spend golden summers together building castles in the sand, creating magical worlds of their own, and forging grand plans for their future. What other relationships in *Nantucket Sisters* take place far from the eyes of the outside world? Why do you think they do?

3. Do you find yourself identifying more with Maggie or Emily? Why?

4. Emily’s mother, Cara, always disapproved of Emily’s summer friendship with Maggie and Ben, whose mother is a local seamstress. She encourages Emily to take sailing lessons and attend fundraisers where she will associate with “summer people” instead. How do you think the environments we grow up in and parental expectations affect us later in life?

5. Emily is passionate about the environment, especially that of Nantucket, and environmental preservation is about keeping the past and the future alive in *Nantucket Sisters*. Why do you think Emily lets her passion for the island fade? Does it correspond with emotional changes in her life?

6. Similarly, we find out in chapter 22 that against his family’s wishes Ben plans to build on the land his stepfather, Thaddeus, left him. What motivates his decision? Do you think he’s trying to block out his memories of Emily or be what she wanted him to be?

7. In chapter 10, Ben and Emily fight over expectations for their engagement. On the surface, the fight is about money, a source of tension that affects many relationships in *Nantucket Sisters*. Ben and Emily have gotten past this issue before—what do you think is really at stake?

8. Maggie and Emily approach their pregnancies very differently—do you think the choices they make about raising their children reflect their personalities? What do you think you would do in either of their places?

9. Maggie's grandmother Clarice has a motto, "You can't keep a good woman down." Clarice seems to grow more and more resilient as she ages, remaining a lively, supportive presence in Maggie's life. Does she remind you of anyone you know?

10. Tyler comes back into Maggie's life unexpectedly. Have you reconnected with a friend or a crush, years later? Did it surprise you?

11. As girls, Maggie and Emily work on a novel together, *Siren Song*, and Maggie grows up to be a writer, working on her novel on cozy winter evenings. What roles do you think writing and storytelling play in *Nantucket Sisters*?

12. *Nantucket Sisters* begins and ends with "a morning in heaven" on the beach. Is there a place that has always been special to you? Why is it meaningful to you?