

## READERS GUIDE

### **Nancy Thayer on her inspiration for *The Guest Cottage***

I've lived on Nantucket for over thirty years, and during these years, I've come to notice how people—close friends and new acquaintances—visit this island and find themselves opening up to new thoughts, new feelings, new people.

What's the magic spell? Is it the salt air? The sun sparkling on water? The sea breezes? Whatever it is, I've watched strangers and friends relax and open up to the world during even a brief vacation.

A good friend of mine once came to the island with her boyfriend for a few days. They swam, lazed on the beach, walked in the gentle waves—and decided to get married. And they did! Another female friend struck up a conversation with a woman in Mitchell's Book Corner about a new book on knitting and so began a long and happy—okay, I have to say it—close-knit friendship. Like Lacey and Desi in *The Guest Cottage*, my children grew up meeting kids on the beach and making summer friends who became lifelong friends. Even in the winter, artists, musicians, writers, scholars, and actors come to the island to be refreshed.

I think it's all about taking a chance, opening our hearts and minds to someone or something new—or looking again at something old and familiar and discovering a treasure hidden inside.

Sometimes, especially when we're part of a family, we spend our energy and emotions simply trying to keep what we have safe. Trying not to let things fall apart. And so we unknowingly blind ourselves to anyone new, anything unsettling.

In *The Guest Cottage*, two families who have suffered losses find themselves living together during a summer on Nantucket. Sophie Anderson and Trevor Black are attracted to each other, but each is afraid to make a mistake, especially since children are involved. So they tread carefully in their new, unexpected relationship, but also learn to open up, for the first time in years, to meeting new people and welcoming change into their lives.

The story of *The Guest Cottage* isn't just a romance. Yes, Sophie meets Trevor, but she also meets a cosmopolitan European who shows her another side of life. Yes, Trevor meets Sophie, but he also meets a grandfather and a teenage boy who help him and his small son grow in ways he never expected. Here, in this rented house on a remote island, Sophie rediscovers a part of herself she had locked away and forgotten when she got married. Here, surrounded by new people, Trevor allows himself to grieve deeply for his wife . . . and to forgive himself.

We can't all travel to idyllic spots to enjoy a couple of months free from our ordinary

lives. But we can travel through reading and music and art and simply opening our eyes to something new—or old.

In my new novel, *The Island House*, two best friends living on Nantucket for the summer look at familiar faces from a fresh angle . . . and discover what their hearts really want.

I discover something new about my life, my thoughts, my dreams every time I write a novel. Someone once wrote, “How do I know what I think until I hear what I have to say?” When we travel to new places, meet new people, encounter new situations, or sit still in a well-known room putting our thoughts on paper, we find ourselves discovering skills and desires we never knew we had before.

Hidden deep in *The Guest Cottage* is a throwaway line, a quick image, a blip of a thought. Trevor is back in his neighborhood in Cambridge, walking down familiar streets to his home, noticing on this summery day all the usual realities of his life: coffee shops, residential streets, houses, front yards, and a “slightly worn olive-green armchair sitting on the curb with a sign pinned to it: free. just take it.” Why not? All sorts of wonderful and revitalizing experiences are waiting for us, if we’re brave enough to stop, look, and take them.

#### Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. On page 80, Sophie thinks to herself, “When one door closes in your life, another door opens. But what if the entire house comes down?” For Sophie and Trevor, a summer in Nantucket holds so much more than fun in the sun. They resolve unfinished business, get to spend time with their kids, and even learn to love again. Do you think any of this would have happened if they hadn’t had to share the guest cottage?

2. Living under the same roof, Sophie and Trevor are forced to compromise. Do you think they’re the better for it? Have you ever thought of a compromise you’ve had to make as an opportunity to grow?

3. Compare Trevor’s and Sophie’s parenting styles. What do you think each of their approaches say about them? What do they do differently? Do you think they learn anything from each other?

4. At Sophie’s dinner party in chapter 19, Connor tells the story of Woolly Bully, a stubborn bull that his wife succeeded in taming on their farm. Why do you think he tells this story to the Andersons and the Blacks?

5. On page 238, Trevor muses that perhaps the traditional family “never existed except on Christmas cards.” Do you agree with Trevor?

6. Similarly, in chapter 32 Trevor's son, Leo, asks Sophie, "Are you my family?" How do you define family? How do you think it is defined in *The Guest Cottage*?

7. Sophie admits that she never loved Zack as much as she loved music, and Trevor acknowledges that he was drawn to Tallulah for superficial reasons. Do you think their reasons for marrying the first time were similar or different?

8. On page 204, Trevor observes that sometimes "people marry the wrong people to get the right children." What do you think about that statement?

9. When Sophie sees the piano in the music room, her dreams of becoming a concert pianist come flooding back to her. Although music has always been her first love, she hasn't played a note since she froze on stage as a teenager. Why do you think Sophie froze? What do you think enables her to play again?

10. Have you ever rediscovered something you were passionate about? What made you revisit it?

11. Throughout *The Guest Cottage*, Leo struggles to play the song his mother used to sing to him on the piano. Why do you think Sophie is the one who recognizes the song he is attempting to play?

12. Sophie rents the guest cottage with help from the inheritance left to her by her unsinkable Aunt Fancy. Aunt Fancy was a woman of many mottos. "If I've gotta go down, I'm gonna go down in style," Sophie remembers her saying. Even in memory, she inspires Sophie to love life and take chances. Does Aunt Fancy remind you of anyone who tells you, in one way or another, "If the horse throws you, climb right back on"?