

READERS GUIDE

My playlist for *THE ISLAND HOUSE*

I grew up in Kansas and lived for a while in Missouri, but for the last thirty-two years of my life I've lived on Nantucket. Nantucket is a small island thirty miles out to sea. The highest speed you can drive here is forty-five miles per hour on the ten-mile straight stretch of road out to Sconset. So I don't have much time to sample new music on the radio the way I did when I was driving eighty miles an hour across the flat prairie. On January 4, 2015, Blake Shelton appeared as a guest on *Saturday Night Live*. When he sang "Boys Round Here" and walked across the stage with those long legs in cowboy boots, I went into a kind of time-warp memory meltdown. I remembered being a girl/young woman in Kansas. I remember dating a long-legged cowboy. I started scribbling notes for my next book, *The Island House*.

I drove around the island, going nowhere, just listening to the country western stations on the radio. (There's something about listening to music while driving that taps right into our emotions. I wonder if scientists have studied that.) The more I listened, the faster Courtney's cowboy beau Monty Blackhorse became real to me. I could see him. I could hear him speak with an unhurried Midwestern drawl.

Here are the songs that inspired me.

Luke Bryan's "Drunk on You" . . . so summer romance!

Dierks Bentley's "Drunk on a Plane" . . . so country and so much fun!

Little Big Town's "Girl Crush" . . . so about a girl in love with a guy who's with another girl! I think we've all been there at least once in our lives.

Uncle Kracker's "Smile" . . . because I can't not smile when I listen to it.

Faith Hill's "This Kiss" . . . it's not new and I don't know if it should be classified as country western. I downloaded it years ago and still play it because it makes me remember those first ecstatic few moments of falling in love.

Nate Ruess's "Nothing without Love," and my personal favorite,

Nate Ruess's "Great Big Storm" . . . because at one time or another, we all go through great big storms, and we can't let go. I don't know if Nate Ruess's music is country western, but he was born in Iowa and he reminds me of Kevin Bacon in *Footloose*.

All these songs took me right to a secret place in my heart and while I was there, I could write about Courtney when she was in Kansas.

They also made me remember that cowboy. Our relationship was brief, but memorable. He liked football and I wanted to live in England and write books, so our break-up was mutual. I went on to have a happy life without him, and I'm sure he had a happy life without me.

In fact, I tried to find out. I Googled him. I also checked his name on Facebook. Didn't find him. I imagine he's living on that black Angus ranch in western Kansas with a loving wife and four long-legged kids and they ride western and use roping saddles. I like to think that's true.

I have a range of music on my phone and computer, from Franc's *Symphony in D-Minor* to The Ting Tings "That's Not My Name." I simply like that music; it doesn't cause me to flash back to a memory.

When I want to get into my “Nantucket mood,” I listen to Billy Joel’s “The Downeaster ‘Alexa,’” a tribute to all our fishermen. And sometimes I go to YouTube to watch John Denver sing his song “Calypso,” which he wrote as a tribute to Jacques Cousteau’s research vessel. I’m fascinated by the creatures who live in the sea around us, and I love this video and the song.

I wonder if everyone has songs that bring her right back to a certain time and place and a certain someone. Has everyone Googled that someone or looked for him or her on Facebook? Does everyone have certain music she listens to when wanting to get into a certain mood? Shakespeare said, “If music be the food of love, play on.” I’d bet money that if he were alive today, he’d like country western music.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. At Susanna’s birthday party, her toast is dedicated almost entirely to her summer children, but she doesn’t mention Christabel at all (Chapter 9). Why do you think she leaves Christabel out?
2. In Chapter 4, James explains to Courtney that he’s ignored her for the whole summer because he knows they can’t be together, since he doesn’t want to have children out of fear that he’ll pass on the gene for bipolar disorder. Do you agree with his initial decision to not have children because he’s a carrier? Why or why not?
3. At the very end of Chapter 4, Courtney considers marrying Monty because he’d be able to give her children. Do you think this is a reasonable decision, even though she knows James is her true love? Should she base her actions on her heart or her head?
4. Robin and Courtney have been best friends for almost a decade, yet they both keep secrets from each other. Why do you think they choose to keep some things hidden for so long?
5. The three main couples in the novel, James and Courtney, Henry and Valerie, and Robin and Quinn, almost don’t end up together because of seemingly irreconcilable differences: James and Courtney are at odds over having children, Henry and Valerie experience a stalemate over Henry’s course of treatment, and Robin and Quinn can’t agree on whether or not to leave Nantucket. Do you think the characters are right to be so set in their ways, or do you think they should have been more open to compromise? Discuss.
6. When Monty arrives on the island (Chapter 16), he provokes more engagement from Dr. V. than any other house guest. Why do you think this is?

7. At the hospital, Dr. V. is much warmer and more fatherly towards his children, and more affectionate towards his wife. What do you think caused such an obvious change in demeanor?

8. Quinn is overprotective of his daughter, Christabel, and claims to know everything about her (Chapter 20), yet somehow she manages to maintain a relationship with a man twenty years older than her without her father knowing. How does this affect your opinion of the relationship between Quinn and Christabel?

9. After the accident, Robin falls out of love with Quinn. Do you think this was caused by Quinn's behavior in the hospital, or can Robin's change of heart be attributed to a greater realization about herself? Discuss.

10. Why do you think that Robin feels almost no hesitation in telling Callum about the whales, when it took her at least a year to tell Quinn, the man she thought was her true love?

11. What are the main themes of the novel? Which did you find most thought-provoking?

12. Discuss the significance of the closing scene, where Robin and Callum listen to the song of an unseen whale.