

Book Club Kit



“A lyrical, moving, and complex tale of family, love, and loss. *Beyond That, the Sea* stands out from other WWII novels and is the perfect book club pick for historical fiction fans!”

—ALYSSA RAYMOND, COPPER DOG BOOKS (BEVERLY, MA)



AN INTERVIEW

with Laura Spence-Ash

LAURA SPENCE-ASH's fiction has appeared in *One Story*, *New England Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and elsewhere. Her critical essays and book reviews appear regularly in the Ploughshares blog. She received her MFA in fiction from Rutgers–Newark, and she lives in New Jersey.

Congratulations on such a beautiful debut novel! What led you to write *Beyond That, the Sea*?

Thank you! Over 20 years ago, I read an article in *The New York Times* about a group of British adults returning to the States to see where they had spent time during World War II when they were young. I was fascinated by this — I was aware that children in London were evacuated to the country, but I hadn't known that children were sent so far afield and often traveled alone. My children were young when I learned about this, and I couldn't stop thinking about the way this would feel to a child, and how this decision might impact the rest of their life. I was also interested in how this would feel to the adults and to the other children in the families, both those sending their child away and those bringing a strange child into their home. I then did some research, including reading a memoir by an evacuee who, coincidentally, had been sent to the same small town in Massachusetts where I went to high school. Suddenly the place came into focus for me, and everything else grew out of that.

Why did you decide to tell Beatrix's story over such a long period of time rather than focusing on a certain moment of her life?

I'm always interested in how fictional characters change over time. I like thinking about incremental change, about how characters slowly shift into a new way of being or understanding, and I also like to be immersed in a character's life over a large swath of time. In this novel, the decision to send Beatrix away is the inciting incident but it is also the big thing that happens — the rest of the book essentially explores the aftermath of that decision. I kept thinking of it as a pebble thrown into a pond — the novel is formed by the circular ripples that develop from the impact, that move outward and diminish over time. If I had focused on a certain moment in Beatrix's life, I think the novel would have lost that sense of scale and time.

What themes did you set out to explore in the book?

I was primarily interested in exploring identity, family, and loss. For much of the novel, Beatrix is struggling to figure out who she is and where she belongs. Beatrix's struggle is unique, of course: Spending five formative years in another country, with another family, would naturally lead to displacement and confusion. Almost all of the characters wrestle with identity, though. I think this is universal — we are all constantly assessing who we are and who we want to be, both within our families and in the world at large. And loss is ever present in this novel, too, although Beatrix bears the heaviest weight: She is without her parents when she comes to the States, and then she leaves the Gregorys behind when she returns to England after the war. One theme that I didn't necessarily set out to write about but which is threaded throughout the novel is love. It is there in all its many forms: romantic, familial, filial, and platonic. I think it's hard to write about family — or perhaps write about these two families — and not write about love.

Which character did you feel the most connected to while writing?

I suppose Beatrix is closest to my heart, but I identify with and am charmed by all the characters. While Beatrix is both the center and the spine of the book, the other characters fill out her world and help us to understand who she is. When I first started working on the novel, I thought Beatrix would be one of three narrators, with William and Gerald, the two boys in her American family, telling part of the story as well. Over time, though, I found myself wanting to learn more about and hear from Beatrix's parents, Millie and Reg, who are left behind in London, and Nancy and Ethan, who treat Beatrix like the daughter they never had. While this is Beatrix's story, it is also very much a novel about family — about the family you grow up with and the family that you create.

Which authors and books have inspired you most over the years?

I love quiet books that focus on characters, rather than plots, and feature ordinary lives and quotidian details. Both of Jhumpa Lahiri's wonderful collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, contain stories that I have read again and again. I think her prose is beautiful and insightful, and her characters so well-drawn. *Brooklyn* and *Nora Webster*, by Colm Tóibín, are exquisite portraits of women coming into their own. Although William Trevor is primarily known as a short story master, his novel *Fools of Fortune* is one of my favorites. It is a gorgeous, slim novel, an intimate and tragic love story which spans decades and is set against the backdrop of the Irish War of Independence in the early 20th century. And more recently, I fell in love with *Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan. Another gem-like novel, it is a beautiful study of a coal merchant in 1980s Ireland, and it ends on such a note of grace.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Imagine you were Bea's parents, living in London during the war. Would you have sent your child to America?
- 2 How would you feel if you were the family accepting a young girl from another country into your family?
Submitted by New Virginia Library Book Club (New Virginia, IA)
- 3 How did the passage of time in the novel affect your reading experience? What about the multiple character perspectives?
- 4 Why do you think the author included Millie's and Reginald's perspectives rather than focusing on only Bea and the Gregorys?
- 5 The Maine house plays a significant role in the Gregorys' lives. What does Maine represent for the three children? Does it change as they grow older?
- 6 Living in London during the war was much different than living in Massachusetts. How did these two distinct settings impact the characters and their choices?
- 7 We see Bea grow into a teenager, a young adult, and finally, a 30-year-old. What changes did you notice in her personality over the years?
- 8 During the war, Ethan and Reginald take up correspondence and begin playing chess via postcards. Was this connection a surprise to you? Why do you think the author built this friendship?
- 9 Even in the beginning, there was a distance between Beatrix and her mother, Millie. How much of the distance in Beatrix's adult life do you think is because Reginald, her father, let her think it was Millie's decision to send her away to America? Do you think the relationship would have been different if Beatrix had known the truth much earlier?

Submitted by Noon Book Group (Bluffton, OH)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 10 How did grief impact each character differently? Did you empathize with some characters' grief over that of others?
- 11 "What's past is prologue" from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is repeated throughout the novel. How do you think Bea, William, and Gerald interpreted this quote?
- 12 Gerald tells Rose, "William was always searching for the next thing, you know that. Maine wouldn't have helped." What do you think William was always searching for? Do you think he ever found it?
- 13 Have you read historical fiction before? How do you think this novel fits into or breaks the mold of the genre?
- 14 When the book ended, was it hard to leave these characters behind?



If you decide to adopt *Beyond That, the Sea* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at reader@celadonbooks.com or post on social media using the hashtags **#CeladonBookClub** and **#BeyondThatTheSea**.



NANCY'S BLUEBERRY PIE

Instructions

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Roll half the pie crust dough into a 9-inch pie pan and poke small holes in the center and around the edge. Set aside.

In a large bowl, add blueberries, sugar, cornstarch, salt, lemon juice, and lemon zest and mix well.

Pour blueberry filling into the crust evenly.

Roll the remaining dough out on the counter to make the lattice top. Cut the crust into 10 strips.

Lay out the strips into a lattice pattern across the top of the pie.

Crimp off the edges of the pie strips and press against the crust edge.

Add the egg to a bowl and whisk. Brush the egg wash on top of the lattice crust, then sprinkle with sugar.

Once the oven is at 425 degrees, place the pie on a cookie sheet on the middle rack.

Bake for 15 minutes, then reduce heat to 375 degrees and bake for 45 minutes, until the pie crust is browned and the blueberry filling is bubbling up through the lattice crust.

Let the pie cool to room temperature.

Optional: Serve with a scoop of vanilla ice cream!

Ingredients

6 cups of blueberries

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup cornstarch

$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt

1 tbsp. lemon juice

1 tsp. lemon zest

1 egg

Pastry dough for a 9" two crust pie

