



Reading Group Guide / Mar 2020

[The Island of Sea Women](#) by [Lisa See](#)

ABOUT THE BOOK

Over the years, Young-sook and Mi-ja endure together the loss of parents, the dramas of marriage and childbirth, cruel family members, disruptive technological advances, and the ever-present dangers that accompany their livelihood. They also face growing unrest from the political turmoil that surrounds their homeland: Japanese occupation gives way to World War II, the Korean War, and its aftermath, leaving the residents of Jeju caught between warring empires. The daughter of a Japanese collaborator, Mi-ja will forever bear the mark of her father's activities, while Young-sook looks poised to inherit her mother's role as the leader of her village diving collective. As their husbands' political ties and tumultuous world events threaten their friendship, Young-sook and Mi-ja see their remote island and everything they have known upended.

The Island of Sea Women deftly explores the complexities of female friendship and introduces readers to the remarkably strong and spirited female divers of Jeju Island. It's also an eye-opening portrait of a country ravaged by decades of conflict and unrest, and a searing examination of the effects that foreign intervention can have on the evolution of a nation and of course individual lives. It asks the eternal questions: How do we find forgiveness? Can we find forgiveness?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ms. See is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *Peony in Love*, *Shanghai Girls*, *China Dolls*, and *Dreams of Joy*, which debuted at #1. She is also the author of *On Gold Mountain*, which tells the story of her Chinese American family's settlement in Los Angeles. Ms. See has also written a mystery series that takes place in China. Her books have been published in 39 languages. See was the recipient of the Golden Spike Award from the Chinese Historical Association of Southern California and the History Maker's Award from the Chinese American Museum. She was also named National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women.

Ms. See wrote the libretto for Los Angeles Opera based on *On Gold Mountain*, which premiered in June 2000. That same year, she also curated the exhibition *On Gold Mountain: A Chinese American Experience* at the Autry Museum. Ms. See then helped develop and curate the Family Discovery Gallery at the Autry Museum, an interactive space for children and their families that focused on Lisa's bi-racial, bi-cultural family. The installation was up for twelve years. In 2003, she curated the inaugural exhibition—a retrospective of artist Tyrus Wong—for the grand opening of the Chinese American Museum in Los Angeles. In addition, she designed a walking tour of L.A.'s Chinatown and wrote the companion guidebook for *Angels Walk L.A.* to celebrate the opening of the MTA's Chinatown station. As a longtime trustee on the University of California Press Foundation, she endowed the Lisa See Endowment Fund in Southern California History and Culture.

Ms. See lives in Los Angeles. You can also follow her adventures on Instagram, Twitter & Facebook. Click here for a [longer bio](#).

FOR DISCUSSION *The suggested questions are intended to help you find new and interesting angles and topics for discussion. May these ideas enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

1. The story begins with Young-sook as an old woman, gathering algae on the beach. What secrets or clues about the past and the present are revealed in the scenes that take place in 2008? Why do we only understand the beginning of the novel after we have finished it?
2. When Young-sook and Mi-ja are fifteen, Young-sook's mother says to them: "You are like sisters, and I expect you to take care of each other today and every day as those tied by blood would do." How are these words of warning? The friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja is one of many examples of powerful female relationships in the novel. Discuss the ways in which female relationships are depicted and the important role they play on Jeju.
3. Early in the book, Young-sook's mother recites a traditional *haenyeo* aphorism: "Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back." She says the sea is like a mother. Later, Grandmother says, "The ocean is better than your natal mother. The sea is forever." How do these contradictory ideas play out in the novel? What do they say about the dangerous work of the *haenyeo*?
4. In many ways, the novel is about blame, guilt, and forgiveness. In the first full chapter, Yu-ri has her encounter with the octopus. What effect does this incident have on various characters moving forward: Mother, Young-sook, Mi-ja, Do-seang, Gu-ja, Gu-sun, and Jun-bu? Young-sook is also involved in the tragic death of her mother. To what extent is she responsible for these sad events? Is her sense of guilt justified?
5. Clara recites a proverb attributed to Buddha: ***To understand everything is to forgive***. Considering the novel as a whole, do you think this is true? Young-sook's mother must forgive herself for Yu-ri's accident, Young-sook must forgive herself for her mother's death, Gu-sun forgives Gu-ja for Wan-soon's death. On a societal level, the people of Jeju also needed to find ways to forgive each other. While not everyone on Jeju has found forgiveness, how and why do you think those communities, neighbors, and families have been able to forgive? Do you think *anything* can be forgiven eventually? Should it? Does Young-sook take too long to forgive given what she witnessed?
6. Mi-ja carries the burden of being the daughter of a Japanese collaborator. Is there an inevitability to her destiny just as there's an inevitability to Young-sook's destiny? Another way of considering this aspect of the story is: are we responsible for the sins of our fathers (or mothers)? Later in the novel, Young-sook will reflect on all the times Mi-ja showed she was the daughter of a collaborator. She also blames Yo-chan for being Mi-ja's son, as well as the grandson of a Japanese collaborator. Was Young-sook being fair, or had her eyes and heart been too clouded?
7. The *haenyeo* are respected for having a matrifocal culture—a society focused on women. They work hard, have many responsibilities and freedoms, and earn money for their households, but how much independence and power within their families and their cultures do they really have? Are there other examples that illustrate the independence of women but also their subservience?
8. What is life like for men married to *haenyeo*? Compare Young-sook's father, Mi-ja's husband, and Young-sook's husband.
9. There is mention of *haenyo* from a different village rowing by Young-sook's collective to share gossip. How fast did information travel around the island and from the mainland? Was the Five-Day Market a good source of gossip or were other places more ideal? Jun-bu mentions his concern about believing information broadcast on the radio, "... but can we trust anything we hear?" Were there specific instances when information broadcast on the radio was misleading or false? What impacts how people hear and interpret the news?

10. Confucianism has traditionally played a lesser role on Jeju than elsewhere in Korea, while Shamanism is quite strong. What practical applications does Shamanism have for the *haenyeo*? Do the traditions and rituals help the *haenyeo* conquer the fear and anxieties they have about the dangerous work they do? Does it bring comfort during illness, death, and other tragedies? Does Young-sook ever question her beliefs, and why?
11. Young-sook's mother recites the aphorism: *If you plant red beans, then you will harvest red beans*. Jun-bu repeats the phrase. How do these two characters interpret the saying? How does this saying play out for various characters?
12. At first it would seem that the visit of the scientists to the island is something of a digression. What important consequences does the visit have for Young-sook and the other *haenyeo*?
13. The aphorism "*Deep roots remain tangled underground*" is used to describe Young-sook's and Mi-ja's friendship, and it becomes especially true when it's revealed that their children, Joon-lee and Yo-chan, are getting married. How else does this aphorism manifest itself on Jeju, especially in the context of the islanders' suffering and shared trauma? Do you think it's true that we cannot remove ourselves from the connections of our pasts?
14. Young-sook's mother-in-law, Do-Saeng, says "There's modern, and then there's tradition." How does daily life on Jeju change between 1938 and 2008? Discuss architecture, the arrival of the scientists and the studies they conduct, the introduction of wet suits and television, etc. How does Young-sook reconcile her traditional *haenyeo* way of life with the encroaching modern world? Do you think it's possible to modernize without sacrificing important traditional values?
15. The characters have lived through Japanese colonialism, the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the Korea War, the 4.3 Incident, and the Vietnam War. How do these larger historic events impact the characters and island life?
16. Mi-ja's rubbings are critical to the novel. How do they illustrate the friendship between Mi-ja and Young-sook? How do they help Young-sook in her process of healing?