

Beach House for Rent

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. In the first two chapters, we learn of Cara's young adulthood—particularly, of her troubled past with her family and her late-in-life reconciliation with her mother. Can you relate to Cara's experiences? Is it ever too late to reconcile with someone after years of absence?
2. Heather's anxiety makes her resistant to change. How do you react to changes that occur in your life? Do you understand Heather's trepidation to move to Isle of Palms for the summer? Is her father's insistence that Heather move out an example of tough love?
3. Turning fifty is a milestone that stirs up lots of emotions for Cara. She's searching for the passion that she feels is missing in her life—and which she sees in Heather. After years of putting aside her dreams, she doubts whether she can find it again. Discuss how her infertility struggles and working for Brett's business prevented her from exploring her own career interests. Is Cara experiencing a midlife crisis? Has a milestone birthday or event ever made you reassess your plans? How important is it to continue pursuing your passions amidst the challenges of our daily lives?
4. Heather is very attached to her canaries. She says her mother's pet canary "saved her" after her mother passed (p. 71). Discuss how animals can offer stability and love to their owners in times of need. Do you have any pets that help you through changes in your life?
5. Heather claims she felt the presence of Cara's mother, Olivia Rutledge, on her first night at the beach house. Do you believe this could happen? What do you make of Cara's reaction? Is she jealous, as Brett suggested, or does her response run deeper?
6. Cara's connection to her mother is closely tied to her involvement with sea turtles. Discuss the impact of the pivotal scene on the beach when Cara witnesses the mother sea turtle come ashore.
7. "Her fear kept her as caged as her canaries. The glass windows were no different than their metal bars" (p. 128). Describe Heather's struggles with anxiety. How does it affect her? What steps does she take to overcome her fears? Do you suffer from anxiety or know someone who does? How do you, or they, handle it?
8. Mary Alice Monroe often writes about the disconnect many people feel with nature. Heather is cut off from nature by her anxiety. Is this fear of going outdoors to experience nature or the wild common today? Discuss the metaphor of Heather's mental cage and whether you think many people are also trapped indoors or are shut-ins.
9. Primrose Cottage (the beach house) is beloved by both women, but for different reasons. What does the house symbolize to each of them? Do you have a place that represents something special to you, too? How does the beach house setting influence the course of events in the novel?
10. Trauma and grief are major themes in this novel. Consider Cara's and Heather's experiences with death. How did they each come to terms with their loss? Discuss the methods they use to help each other. Do they ever come to a place of healing?

11. Navigating a romantic relationship is anxious territory for Heather. How does her anxiety interfere with developing any relationship? Discuss how common the negative voices in our heads are when we feel vulnerable or faced with confrontation. Do you have a worry stone?

12. The novel is rich with descriptions of nature and its healing powers. Heather quickly becomes enchanted by the island's beauty after settling into her new beach rental. "Suddenly the path opened up, and she stood before the vast vista of sea and sky as dawn broke around her. Great shafts of rosy light spread across the gray sky. The beach below, washed clean by the tide, shimmered in the pearly tints of the sunrise" (p. 134). How is nature a source of strength for Heather, or to other characters in the novel? Is there a particular scene or passage that stood out for you? Does nature play a role in your life?

13. Discuss the structure of the novel. Cara's and Heather's stories approached the themes of grief, anxiety, and passion from different viewpoints, allowing varying perspectives of age and experience. What parts of their past helped you better understand their present selves? Who did you relate to more?

14. Cara believes that when she moved back to Isle of Palms ten years ago to care for her mother "she could see that thinking of another person made her open up and heal herself" (p. 210). Acknowledging this, how can Cara heal herself once more? Is moving back to the beach house the best way to mend her grief? Do you think her plan is inconsiderate to Heather? What would you do if you were Cara? What do you make of the two women's resolution?

15. *Beach House for Rent* is set against the backdrop of shorebirds. Monroe introduces readers to different species and the threats. When you go to your favorite beach, how will this novel influence your appreciation as well as your actions? Discuss the birds in your area. How many species can you name? How can you help protect them?