

This reading group guide for *The Summer Guests* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

From the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Beach House series comes a heartwarming and evocative novel about the bonds and new beginnings that are born from natural disasters and how, even during the worst of circumstances—or perhaps because of them—we discover what is most important in life.

Late August is a beautiful time on the Southern coast—the peach trees are ripe, the ocean is warm, and the sweet tea is icy. A perfect time to enjoy the rocking chairs on the porch. But beneath the calm surface bubbles a threat: it’s also peak hurricane season.

When a hurricane threatens the coasts of Florida and South Carolina, an eclectic group of evacuees flees for the farm of their friends Grace and Charles Phillips in North Carolina: the Phillips’s daughter Moira and her rescue dogs, famed equestrian Javier Angel de la Cruz, makeup artist Hannah McLain, horse breeder Gerda Klug and her daughter Elise, and island resident Cara Rutledge. They bring with them only the few treasured possessions they can fit in their vehicles. Strangers to all but the Phillips, they must ride out the storm together.

During the course of one of the most challenging weeks of their lives, relationships are put to the test as the evacuees are forced to confront the unresolved issues they have with themselves and with each other. But as the storm passes, they realize that what really matters isn’t what they brought with them to the mountains. Rather, it’s what they’ll take with them once they leave.

With Mary Alice Monroe’s “usual resplendent storytelling” (Patti Callahan Henry, *New York Times* bestselling author), *The Summer Guests* is a poignant and compelling story of self-discovery, love, and redemption.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Each chapter opens with a location, a time stamp, and a weather update. What effect does this information have on the tone of the book, and the mood going into the chapters? Why do you think the author chose to communicate this information this way?

2. Early on, we learn that Hannah has been through a divorce. She says that “marriage to an older man was confining.” (p. 26) The Hannah we know now is vivacious and independent; how do you think her marriage and its end impacted her dating habits, and her drive to pursue her dreams? What do you think she meant by “confining?”

3. When Cara is planning to leave the mountains and return to her home in Isle of Palms, she recalls her mother’s advice: “a wise woman never turn[s] her back on the ocean.” (p. 44) What does this advice mean to you? Do you think Cara has turned her back on the ocean?

4. Gerta and Grace share the kind of lifelong friendship many women aspire to, but few have. Their meeting at boarding school got off to a rocky start, but they eventually developed a mutual respect: “they compared grades, medals, points at competitions. Nonetheless, they were also each other’s top cheerleaders” (p. 79). How do you think this shaky beginning shaped their friendship in the long run? What do you think has made their friendship work after so many years?

5. Charles’s weakened health is a major point of conflict between him and Grace. During a heated confrontation about it, Grace tells Charles, “I held your hand when you weren’t sure you’d ever get out of that wheelchair. Did you think all that only happened to you? It happened to me too!” (p. 119) At the same time, Charles bristles at Grace’s attempts to let her fear control his life. How did you feel reading this exchange between them? Who do you think makes the stronger case for buying or not buying a jumping horse, and why? How much say should a person’s loved ones have when it comes to decisions about his or her wellbeing?

6. Supernatural forces play an important role in the book. Moira has a strong spiritual connection with both her family’s land, and with the animals she encounters; when she visits the sacred hilltop on her parents’ property, she thinks

back to the Native American women who once lived there and “she felt their spirits They spoke to her clearly.” (p. 198). Even Gerta comes to believe in reincarnation when she meets a horse with whom she has an instant connection. What was your initial reaction upon reading about Moira’s gift? Did you believe that Gerta’s new horse could be Razzmajazz reincarnate? Do you think it’s possible to experience this kind of spiritual connection in real life? Discuss why or why not.

7. Both Charles and Gerta suffer from life-changing injuries before the book begins. Charles’s serious fall confines him to his bed for months, and Gerta’s amputation ends her Olympic dreams. How do these characters respond to their injuries differently? How is Grace’s attitude towards these two accidents different?

8. Several of the characters grapple for control—Elise struggles to command Whirlwind, and Gerta struggles to reign in her headstrong daughter—all while an out-of-control weather system upends their plans. How do the characters approach the things they think they can control, like horses and each other, and how do they approach things they know they have no control over, like the weather? Which tactics seem more effective?

9. Throughout the book, Moira struggles to decide what direction to take in her marriage. Her story begins with her resolute decision to leave her husband Thom; mid-book, she tearfully confides in Elise that she feels lonely and unloved—“Weeks go by without anything but texts. Not a single conversation. It’s hard to feel in love in that scenario.” (p. 128). Finally, Thom shows up at Freehold Farm to reunite with Moira, who is now determined to make things work. Were you surprised when Moira chose to stay with Thom? What aspects of their relationship did you think worked well, and which aspects needed an overhaul?

10. Sexual tensions run high in the book. Characters make up, break up, couple up, and come out. When the characters first come together at Grace’s home, Angel’s mare is in heat, and so is Moira’s dog; stallions are restless with desire, and dogs are constantly howling out in the yard. How does this heightened state among the animals mirror the characters’ relationship woes and triumphs? Did it surprise you that the author chose to include these details about the animals?

11. Several of the women in this story reinvent themselves after a major life change. Hannah launches her makeup company after her career as a model ends, Gerta find success in her breeding program after her divorce, and the end of the book finds Moira and Elise making significant career changes too. How is the theme of resilience and starting over on display here and throughout the larger arcs of the book? How does the threat of destruction from a hurricane—the preparation for that damage, and the anticipation of rebuilding once it has passed—parallel the kind of rebuilding the characters have done in other areas of their lives?

12. Grace refers to this hurricane retreat as a “fishbowl” and Gerta tells her “I feel like my world is spinning around me. Everything is happening so quickly. What I thought was grounded is suddenly up in the air.” (p. 284). Grace responds that the “past is pushing into [the] present” and each of the characters is undergoing something of a “personal hurricane.” What does Grace mean by this? What is it about extenuating circumstances that brings underlying feelings to the surface, both in the book and in life? How do past and present clash in *The Summer Guests*?

13. Cara and David’s journey to the Isle of Palms takes place outside of the “fishbowl” at Grace’s house, underlining how isolated the two really are. Why do you think the author chose to keep Cara’s storyline largely separated from the other characters’? How did you feel reading Cara’s chapters, not knowing what was happening at Grace and Charles’s house?

14. The relationships between the characters and their animals is central to the story. Humans and animals bond, compete for attention, and find new homes—Angel fawns over his dog Max, while Max butts heads with Hannah; Elise struggles to command Whirlwind, while Whirlwind’s bond with Karl grows stronger; Gerta finds a cosmic connection with a rescue horse; Hannah brings Nacho the Chihuahua into her home and her heart. How do the animals’ big personalities play out on the page? How do their bonds and conflicts with the human characters impact the story’s plot?

15. After many conversations where Grace encourages Gerta to let Elise be independent, Gerta finally tells Grace to take her own advice and to let Charles

make his own decisions about riding. Did this moment surprise you? How did this conversation change the relationship between the characters? Did you agree with Gerta's advice? Why or why not?

16. *The Summer Guests* has a large cast of characters, and alternates between multiple points of view. Who did you view as the main character? What was it about that person's arc that made you view it as the central plot line of the story?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Bring your pet to your next book club meeting. *The Summer Guests* explores the strong bond between humans and their animals, particularly dogs and horses. Meet at a dog park to discuss the book, or follow up your book club meeting with a volunteer trip to a local animal shelter.

2. Dive in to your own beach house memories. Bring a few family vacation photos or videos to your next book club meeting. Discuss your favorite beachy vacations, and your memories of beach houses (or any vacation houses!) you have loved over the years.

3. Host a dinner party or luncheon. Grace is host extraordinaire during Hurricane Noelle. From flower arrangements to wine pairings to comfort food, Grace leaves no stone unturned when it comes to making her guests feel at ease. Sit around a lovingly-set table and discuss the book over a home-cooked meal and your favorite wine.

4. Get back in the saddle. Find a local horseback riding stable near you, and spend an afternoon on the trails. Enjoy the fresh air, the gentle sway of your horse's gait, and the feeling of reins in your hand. Think about the importance of the bond between horses and humans in the book, and be open to observing the unique personality traits of the horse you are riding.

5. Read more from Mary Alice Monroe. *The Summer Guests* can be read on its own, but explore the rest of the *Beach House* series to learn more about Cara Rutledge and her emotional connection to her home on Isle of Palms. To find more books by Mary Alice Monroe, visit MaryAliceMonroe.com.