

*A
Lowcountry
Wedding*



Mary Alice Monroe

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

Introduction

This is the fourth book in *New York Times* bestselling author Mary Alice Monroe's Lowcountry Summer series about three half sisters and their grandmother living on Sullivan's Island.

After finding love and new beginnings, Marietta Muir and her granddaughters, Dora, Carson, and Harper, are facing their lowcountry weddings. While new careers and dual wedding plans bring insecurities to the surface, it's the unexpected arrival of Reverend Atticus Green who introduces an unknown family secret into their midst.

As personal crises and two weddings converge, it will take the Muir sisters' strong bond to persevere and appreciate how compassion, honesty, and commitment are fundamental for marriage.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. When Mamaw was first married, her mother, Barbara, told her, “[A]t the root of all etiquette and manners is kindness” (p. xiii). Do you agree? Etiquette and manners have evolved since the 1920’s Emily Post. What do you think women of Dora, Carson, and Harper’s generation would say about their great-grandmother’s view of the world? How about Granny James?
2. Early in *A Lowcountry Wedding*, we learn that Marietta believes that the purpose of marriage is to be “an institution set up by society to protect the concept of the family” (p. xvii). Do you think her opinion is informed by her generation or by her personality? How do you think her beliefs regarding marriage evolved by the end of the novel? Discuss what you believe the purpose of marriage is.
3. Were you surprised by Dora’s initial response to Devlin’s proposal? Whose side of their argument do you find yourself agreeing with more?

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4. Atticus Green arrives at Sea Breeze unannounced. What was your initial reaction when he was introduced to the Muir sisters? How did his role as marriage counselor support the brides and the family?
 5. Take a look at how everyone is dressed at the rehearsal dinner, beginning on page 182. What do you think their choices say about their personalities and roles within the upcoming weddings? How about within the Muir family at large?
 6. “[S]he could not have imagined a happier ending to this evening’s play” (p. 195). Why does Mamaw call Harper’s rehearsal dinner a play? If this is a play, who is the main character(s) and who, if anyone, should we consider the antagonist? Discuss if you think the proceedings of a wedding can be likened to a play—characters with roles to play, lines to say, costumes and rehearsals.
 7. Much of Atticus’s personality and habits, including his alcoholism, can be traced back to his genealogy. Yet he also places much store in the strong family values he learned from his parents. What do you think Mary Alice Monroe is trying to tell us here in the nature vs nurture debate? Contrast Atticus and Carson’s way of dealing with their alcoholism with Parker’s. Why do you think they were arguably more successful in living with this disease?
 8. Early in the book Mary Alice Monroe writes that “Weddings bring out the best and the worst in people” (p. 114). Share

with your book club stories of best and worst behavior at a wedding you've attended (or your own!).

9. While Harper is initially against signing a prenuptial agreement, Granny James raises some valid points for protecting the family assets for Harper's future children. Whose viewpoint—Harper, Granny James, or Taylor—do you find yourself agreeing with most? Would you sign a prenup?
10. Taylor and Harper live in Sea Breeze together, but to Taylor, since Harper owns the house and her name is on the deed, "It feels like I'm living in *your* house" (p. 275), rather than a house they both have equal control over. Do you think Harper would feel the same way if the roles were reversed and Taylor owned all of Sea Breeze on paper? Or if she lived in Taylor's ancestral family home that he owned and connected with fond memories? How does gender, society, even region, influence the roles a man and a woman assume in marriage today?
11. What do you make of Harper's renewed interest in religion and how she relates to God? How does this compare with the role of religion in Atticus's life? How common is it for young mothers to reconsider the role of religion, and baptism, in their new family?
12. Were you at all surprised by the direction Mamaw and Girard's relationship went? In what ways does their relationship mimic, and in what ways does it differ from, Dora and Devlin's relationship?

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13. Consider Parker's written legacy: "It was the treasure for which the girls had been searching for so long. Not because it was an outstanding novel and would bring great wealth; sadly it wasn't. But because the book was Parker's life's work. That made it priceless" (pp. 370–71). Why is it important for the Muir sisters to understand their father? Why does a person's life's work take on the mantle of "priceless"? Do you think Parker deserved the elevated status his daughters give his novel? Finally, why do you believe Parker wrote, and hid, his children's book, *Tideland Treasures*?
 14. The novel describes two classic lowcountry wedding venues—the plantation wedding and the beach wedding. Which would you prefer?
 15. Delphine's role in the novel, while understated, rounds out the series's theme of appreciating and protecting wildlife. Why do you think Mary Alice Monroe wrote the epilogue in the dolphin's point of view? Discuss the ways you can support dolphins in the wild.

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Fun drinks feature prominently in the rehearsal dinner and at Harper and Carson's wedding. As part of your club's meeting, bring ingredients for the cocktail created by Firefly: "A Lowcountry Wedding" or the "Firefly Cannonball" (recipes follow).
2. *A Lowcountry Wedding* is the fourth book in the Lowcountry Summer series. If you haven't already, check out the first three books about the Muir sisters, *The Summer Girls*, *The Summer Wind*, and *The Summer's End*. Or reread the books as a group and refresh your memory on how Mamaw, Dora, Carson, and Harper all began their journey to finding Sea Breeze and one another again.
3. Create the delicious lowcountry dishes mentioned in the book: "Lowcountry Gumbo," "Lowcountry Pickled Shrimp," and "Pecan Tassies" (recipes follow). Don't forget the cornbread!
4. Have book club members bring photographs of their weddings to share. Perhaps have a prize for the worst bridesmaid dresses!

RECIPES

All recipes from *Rise and Shine!: A Southern Son's Treasury of Food, Family, and Friends* by Johnathon Scott Barrett and courtesy of Mercer University Press.

A Lowcountry Wedding Cocktail

3 ounces sparkling wine
or prosecco

1 ounce Firefly Peach Moonshine
1 orange wedge

Firefly Cannonball

3 ounces Firefly Sweet
Tea Vodka

2 to 3 ounces Cannonborough
Ginger Beer
 $\frac{1}{4}$ slice of lemon, squeezed

Add ingredients to shaker to blend. Pour over ice, and enjoy!

Lowcountry Gumbo

<i>1 pound shrimp, peeled and deveined, shells reserved*</i>	<i>¼ teaspoon each salt and freshly ground black pepper</i>
<i>2 quarts low-sodium chicken stock</i>	<i>1 tablespoon minced garlic, packed</i>
<i>½ pound smoked sausage, such as andouille, sliced into ½-inch rounds</i>	<i>1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, no salt added</i>
<i>4 teaspoons creole spice,** divided</i>	<i>1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce</i>
<i>½ pound boneless, skinless chicken thighs</i>	<i>½ teaspoon Texas Pete or other hot sauce</i>
<i>2 tablespoons olive oil</i>	<i>4 bay leaves</i>
<i>1 scant cup chopped onion</i>	<i>1 tablespoon minced fresh basil</i>
<i>½ cup each chopped celery, green bell pepper, and red bell pepper</i>	<i>2 teaspoons each minced fresh thyme and oregano</i>
	<i>1½ cups sliced fresh okra, cut into ¼-inch rounds</i>
	<i>2 teaspoons filé powder</i>
	<i>6 servings of cooked rice</i>
	<i>½ cup chopped fresh parsley</i>

Place shrimp shells and stock in a pot; bring to a boil, reduce heat, stir, and allow to simmer for 15 minutes. Set aside.

** Instead of shrimp, you may also add or substitute 1 pound of lump backfin crab. Because the crab is so delicate, I recommend stirring it in at the very end of the recipe until just heated through.*

*** Harper makes this recipe a little lighter by cutting out the sausage or using chicken andouille sausage. Panfry ingredients in a little olive oil instead of bacon grease to cut back on the fat.*

While waiting for the stock to simmer, brown the sausage in a Dutch oven. Remove the sausage and set aside. Drain all but 1 tablespoon of the accumulated fat.

Rub 2 teaspoons of the creole spice onto the chicken thighs. Add olive oil to the pan and bring to medium-high heat.

Add chicken, browning nicely on each side, turning occasionally until done, about 10 minutes. Set aside with the sausage.

Keeping the Dutch oven on medium-high heat, add the onion, celery, and bell peppers, along with the salt and pepper. Cook, stirring constantly, for 2 minutes.

Add the garlic, stir, and cook another 4 to 5 minutes, until the vegetables are soft and the onion becomes translucent.

Strain the stock into the pan, pushing down on the shells in your sieve to get the juices.

Cube the chicken into bite-size pieces.

Add the tomatoes, Worcestershire sauce, hot sauce, bay leaves, basil, thyme, and oregano and the remaining 2 teaspoons of creole spice. Bring to a boil, and reduce heat, stirring.

Add okra, sausage, and chicken and continue cooking for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.

With the gumbo on a steady simmer, add your shrimp, stirring occasionally; cook for 3 to 4 minutes, until just done.

Sprinkle filé powder over the stew, stirring, and allow to cook 2 to 3 minutes more; the gumbo will thicken slightly.

To serve, pour into a bowl, top with ½ cup rice and sprinkle with parsley. Serve with a hot biscuit to sop up the gravy.

Serves 6

Lowcountry Pickled Shrimp

This dish is a fixture on Savannah buffet tables and sideboards; usually served in large cut-glass bowls, it makes a beautiful presentation. There are a number of variations on the dish—some with capers, maybe green bell pepper, some spice it up with red pepper flakes. Tom likes to throw in cherry tomatoes and fresh bay leaves to give it a bold splash of color, particularly at a Christmas party. But the basics are always the same: lightly poached shrimp, oil, vinegar, onions, and celery. I enjoy the taste of fresh dill with shrimp and include it in this recipe.

<i>3 quarts water</i>	<i>3 tablespoons capers</i>
<i>¼ cup Old Bay Seasoning</i>	<i>¼ cup minced fresh dill weed,</i>
<i>3 pounds large shrimp, peeled</i>	<i>packed</i>
<i>and deveined, tails removed</i>	<i>1½ cups good quality vegetable</i>
<i>3 stalks celery, sliced into</i>	<i>oil</i>
<i>2-inch julienne strips</i>	<i>¾ cup apple cider vinegar</i>
<i>1 medium Vidalia or red</i>	<i>½ teaspoon Dijon mustard</i>
<i>onion, very thinly sliced</i>	<i>1 teaspoon salt</i>
<i>into rings</i>	<i>¼ teaspoon freshly ground black</i>
<i>1 (4-ounce) jar sliced pimiento,</i>	<i>pepper</i>
<i>drained</i>	<i>3 to 4 large sprigs fresh parsley,</i>
<i>6 to 8 fresh bay leaves</i>	<i>for garnish</i>

Bring the water and the Old Bay Seasoning to a boil in a large pot. Add shrimp, stir, cover, remove from heat, and set aside for 5 minutes. The shrimp are done when the tail section curves up and almost touches the head area. Drain thoroughly in a colander; do not rinse.

Place the shrimp into a large airtight container, along with the celery, onion, pimiento, bay leaves, capers, and dill. Toss to mix.

In a bowl, whisk together the oil and remaining ingredients except the parsley. Pour over the shrimp mixture and toss to coat. Cover the container and refrigerate 8 hours or overnight. Stir once or twice during the chilling process.

Before serving, drain the shrimp in a colander. Place in a decorative crystal or cut-glass bowl and garnish with sprigs of parsley.

Lemon Bars

CRUST

*1 cup plus 1 tablespoon
unsalted butter, at room
temperature, divided*

*2 cups all-purpose flour
¾ cup confectioners' sugar
Pinch of salt*

FILLING

*4 large eggs
2 cups granulated sugar
½ cup freshly squeezed
lemon juice
2 teaspoons finely grated
lemon zest*

*1 teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt
¼ cup all-purpose flour
3 tablespoons superfine
or confectioners' sugar, for
decoration*

INSTRUCTIONS

CRUST

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Grease a 9 x 13-inch baking dish with 1 tablespoon of butter.

Mix the 1 cup of butter, the flour, sugar, and salt in a bowl; stir well until thoroughly combined.

Place dough in the baking dish and pat down the mixture into the bottom of the dish with your hands until evenly distributed.

Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, or until the crust is golden. Remove from oven and allow to cool.

FILLING

Beat the eggs and sugar until smooth.

Add the juice, zest, baking powder, salt, and flour; stir until well incorporated. Pour the filling over the crust.

Bake for 25 to 30 minutes, or until the filling is set.

Allow to cool to room temperature. Sprinkle with sugar and cut into bars. Can be stored for several days in an airtight container.

Serves 16 to 20