

This reading group guide for *Swimming Lessons* 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

The cycle of life of the loggerhead sea turtle on the Isle of Palms has special meaning for the turtle ladies who watch over them in this small coastal South Carolina town. Every season brings new life and new challenges as the turtles make their way back to the ocean.

Turtle lady Toy Sooner has faced her share of challenges. The single mother left an abusive relationship to raise her young daughter. She's found meaning working at the aquarium, but she's not sure she's ready for the challenge of starting a new turtle hospital...or a new relationship with her boss, Ethan.

As the summer progresses and loggerheads take their steps toward healing and freedom, Toy must find her own strength to face her fear and move courageously toward the future.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1) Monroe's novels are inspired by the natural world. For *SWIMMING LESSONS*, Mary Alice volunteered at the sea turtle hospital at the SC Aquarium. In the novel she writes about the rehabilitation and release of a beautiful loggerhead on the Isle of Palms—"Big Girl." The reader witnesses the transformation of the sea turtle from an emaciated, weak, barnacle encrusted creature to a gleaming, healthy and strong specimen of a sea turtle in her prime. How is this symbolic of Toy's transformation in the novel?

2) Toy raises the universal question, "*Am I a good mother?*"

As Toy explores this question, she examines the tending instinct. Is the tending instinct, or the drive to nurture, inherited? Is it carried on the X chromosome? Or is being a good mother something that is a learned behavior?

3) Sea turtles are guided by their instinct to return to the beach of their birth, to leave the sea and to crawl ashore to dig a nest. Then they return to the sea, never to return to the nest. Despite this seeming abandonment, this is their biological model. They are following an instinct over 100 million years old. What makes a good mother in the human species? What instincts do we follow?

4) Toy's story is a redemptive one. How does Lovie change Toy's life? Discuss how the power of one person— a role model or a mentor—has the power to change someone's life.

5) In SWIMMING LESSONS, Toy's life was changed by the influence of Lovie, and later, the women in the Turtle Team. As the years pass, Toy's daughter, Little Lovie, is raised by the "village" of the Turtle Team. Discuss how this kind of innovative family structure can provide a network of love and support.