

Reading Group Guide

A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR TEA BY THE SEA

TEA *by the* SEA

a novel

DONNA HEMANS



Hello Readers,

Thank you for choosing *Tea By the Sea* for your bookclub.

Tea By the Sea grew from a call I heard on the “Sunday Contact” radio program that airs in Jamaica. Listeners across Jamaica and abroad call the program to locate people with whom they’ve lost touch. On one of my trips home to Jamaica, I heard a mother pleading for information about the whereabouts of her eight-year-old son. The father had taken the boy, but she didn’t know where they were, whether they were still in Jamaica or living in America or elsewhere. I knew immediately that the mother’s search was the kernel of a story I had started writing about a woman who refused to leave a church.

The book traces Plum’s search for the daughter taken from her at birth. Seventeen years after Plum’s search begins, she sees an article in a community newspaper with a photo of Lenworth. He has become a priest. Her plan: confront him and walk away with the daughter he took from her.

Though the book is fictional, family separation is a topic of our time, with some parents never learning where their children are or whether they will ever find them again. The book is also an exploration of belonging: To whom does the missing girl belong? Does Plum have the inherent right to raise her child? And it is an exploration of resilience: How does one carry on in the face of unbearable loss?

I hope you enjoy the book, and that it sparks great conversations. Thanks for reading.

Donna Hemans

Q&A

1. What's your favorite place among the ones you describe in Tea By the Sea?

Anchovy. My father grew up in Anchovy and the house that Lenworth chooses as his refuge is actually my grandparents' house. I have a lot of memories of Sunday afternoon visits, my grandfather standing on the verandah and looking down the hill at my parents, my sisters and me arriving. When I first thought of using the house as the setting, I had in mind the way the house and yard looked on one of my visits. The house was empty then. The last tenant had left, the yard was overgrown and there was a random bedsheet on the verandah. It looked like someone was either squatting or had come to use the empty house for a late-night tryst.

Like so many other Caribbean families, mine is a family of migrants. And, one of the things about migration in general is the broken ties with a family home, land, customs. Within my family there has been a lot of talk about selling family land, about who will take care of it now that so many of us have migrated and my father's siblings who now own it are elderly. Aside from those practical discussions, I also think about what it meant to my grandparents who were born some 70 years after the abolition of slavery in Jamaica, to own land and build a house they could pass on to future generations. In the end, I realized that using the house as the setting and describing it so fully was part of my attempt to preserve in writing a place that I believe will soon pass out of my family.

Q&A

2. How did you choose the title, and what does it mean to you?

I sometimes jot down words I think would make a good title for a story. And that's what happened here. I wrote "tea by the sea" in my notebook and figured that at some point I would find a story to go along with it. It wasn't immediately clear to me how tea by the sea connected to the idea of a mother searching for her child. But figuring out the connection was quite frankly one of those cartoon lightbulb moments. I like to have a title in mind early on in a project because it helps me anchor the story. I think of the title as a thread on which most everything that happens hangs and I ask myself over and over, how each part of the overall story connects to it.

3. What was the first scene you thought of and how did you know you had enough to write a novel?

The first scene was one in the third part of the book where Plum is getting her daughters ready for school. She completes a series of tasks—brushing the girls' hair, packing their lunches, cleaning up a spill—the kind of endless tasks that define domestic life. But the moment Plum turns away from the train station and heads to the church, I knew I had the makings of a longer work. I didn't know where Plum's journey would take her but I wanted to be on that journey with her. It didn't begin to morph into a novel though until I heard the mother pleading on the Sunday evening call-in program for news on the whereabouts of her son.

Q&A

4. What do you hope readers take away from the novel?

Agency is a big theme, and an especially important idea in these times. Lenworth makes a momentous decision to take the baby without consulting Plum, and his actions have significant consequences for Plum and Opal. His reasoning is complicated but it is embedded in a patriarchal and colonial system that often denies agency to some. Today, we continue to see women dealing with attempts to take away our agency or our right to make decisions about our own bodies, from how we dress or wear our hair, to whether we work outside the home or chose to have children. I hope the book gives us room to look a bit more closely at the many patriarchal and colonial systems that still define our society and serve to take away individuals' rights to make choices for themselves.

5. Tell us about the cover.

The moment I saw the cover image of a girl with her back turned and face hidden—from Brooklyn-based photographer Keisha Scarville's Mama's Clothes series—I knew it perfectly captured the perspectives of these three family members around whom the novel revolves. From Plum's perspective, this is how her missing daughter appears: hidden, covered, faceless. I love the sense too that at any moment the girl will turn around and reveal herself. The child on the cover is also the daughter that Lenworth cannot bear to see. As his daughter ages and her resemblance to her mother grows, Lenworth becomes more uncomfortable around his daughter. And the child reflects how Opal sees herself: the unseen child longing to belong.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the relationship between Plum and Lenworth.
2. Discuss Plum's primary concern with abandonment. She feels abandoned by her parents who left her in Jamaica for two years without even asking her, then by Lenworth.
3. Do you think a mother would do anything to be reunited with her child?
4. When Plum returns to Brooklyn, she finds herself unable to "care about other people's stories or past lives. She had her own storied past and present, and now she had a firm conviction that despite her parents' claim, the fairytale endings — the scripted Hollywood kind — weren't really available to her. Hollywood's movies had told her that fairytale endings weren't available to a dark-skinned girl, and immigrant at that." Discuss Plum's decision to give up on dreaming and deciding to settle for "a simple, ordinary dream...a job that paid for food and shelter." What does this say about the immigrant's idea of dreaming?

5. Lenworth raises Opal but he doesn't fully embody the role of her father. Discuss Lenworth's and Opal's relationship. Did you come away from the story with a firm sense of whether Lenworth's actions are justified? Do you have any sympathy for Lenworth?
6. Agency is mentioned several times in the novel and is a consistent theme throughout. Why is personal autonomy and agency so important?
7. There are several secrets in the book. Plum keeps her daughter a secret from her husband, Alan; Lenworth keeps a secret from his wife, Pauline, and daughter, Opal; and Opal is creating a secret life of her own. Discuss the role secrets play in the novel.

8.

Place is a real character in the novel. Jamaica's hills, the blue seas, the rich vegetation are juxtaposed with the density and grit of Brooklyn. How does the setting enhance the emotions in the story?

9.

How is motherhood defined throughout the book?

10.

What does the title mean to you?

11.

What do you think happens to Plum after the novel ends?

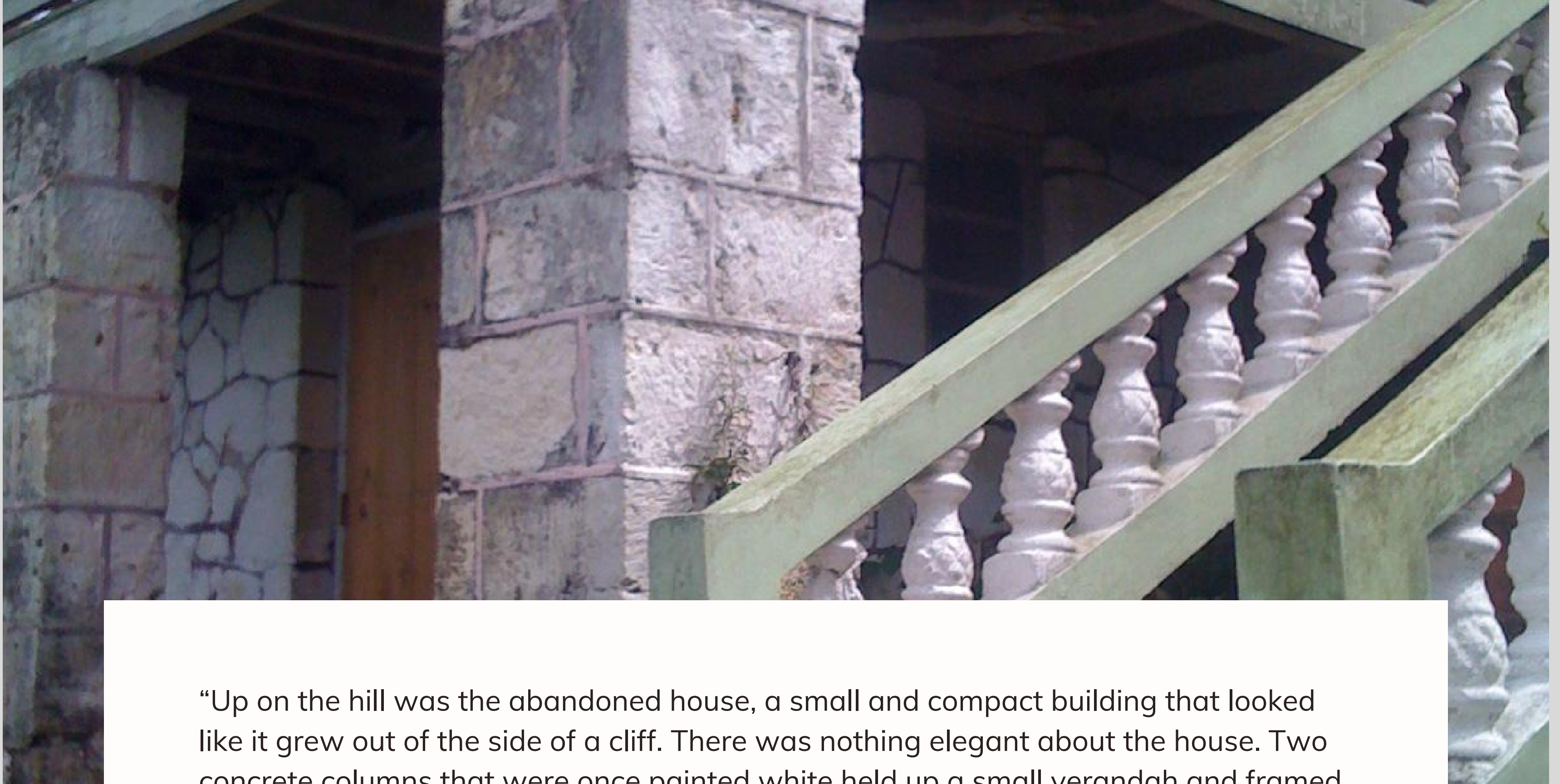
12.

What do you think happens to Lenworth after the novel ends?



Photos

“There was no use in waiting, but Plum waited anyway on the verandah, her arms on the railing, her eyes trained on the hill and the roof of the house in the valley below, her body like that of a woman expecting her family or visitors to appear any minute at the bottom of the hill.”



“Up on the hill was the abandoned house, a small and compact building that looked like it grew out of the side of a cliff. There was nothing elegant about the house. Two concrete columns that were once painted white held up a small verandah and framed a door to a cellar. To the right of the columns, a set of concrete steps rose up to the red floor of the verandah and the aqua railing that hemmed it in.”

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