

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As this book begins Claire Avery is at her husband Charles's funeral. How did Charles die? What was his occupation and what did you learn about him in the early parts of this book and later? Facing the death of a loved one is always hard. What factors make this situation especially difficult for Claire? Why can't she stay in the home where she and her two girls live? What occupational and personal issues does she face? How does Charles's brother Parker help her at the funeral and after?
2. At the funeral, you meet Claire's family and Charles's family. What are your impressions of each? What do you think of Claire's plans to go to live with her family in Arlington, VA, for a time and what do you think of her father, mother, and twin sisters? How do Mary Helen and Suki feel about going to live in Arlington? What does Parker think? Why do you think Claire and the girls might have problems living with either family?
3. What factors bonded Parker and Charles as brothers in their large family? What is Parker's occupation and where does he live? What did Charles make Parker promise to do if anything ever happened to him? How did Parker's wife Ann die and how was Charles a strong support to him in that time? How were Ann and Claire different in personality? Why did Parker encourage Claire and the girls to come to stay at his beach house at Edisto for a time? Had they been there before?
4. Claire's girls, Mary Helen and Suki, are introduced in the book's first chapter. How old are they as the book begins and how are they different in looks and personality? How do the girls comfort and support Claire in dealing with Charles's death and how does Claire support them? How is their family faith a strong help? What scenes with Claire and the girls, early in the book and later, remind you of scenes with your own children or children you may have worked with?
5. The book begins in Sweetwater, a small town in Tennessee, and then shifts in setting to Edisto Island, a remote barrier island off the coast of South Carolina. Have you ever been to Edisto Island? The island lies about halfway between Charleston and Beaufort and scenes in both these cities play a part in this story. Have you ever visited Charleston or Beaufort? Did you recognize the scenes and places described in these locations? In the book you learn that Edisto is somewhat different from many popular beach vacation spots. How? Would these differences make Edisto more or less attractive to you?
6. Dealing with the grief of death is always hard. Parker mentions a book by Elizabeth Kubler Ross describing the stages of grief. The five stages are: (1) Denial and difficulty in believing the death has occurred; (2) Anger and pain, feeling lost; (3) Bargaining, wishing things were as they were before; (4) Depression and sadness over the loss; and finally (5) Acceptance of the reality that the loved one is gone and moving on. Although these were not mentioned in the book, did you see

some of these emotional stages playing out. Which stage did Parker say he'd stayed in too long? Claire seems to drift through the summer after Charles' death, not sure of the right direction to take with her life. Have you seen these stages of grief playing out in your life or in the lives of people you love?

7. Friendships mean so much in our lives. Parker has friends at the island and at Westcott Antiques with Drake Jenkins and Nora Cavanaugh where he works. What did you learn about Drake and Nora? How did Parker also become close to Nora's son Andrew? Some of Parker's friends at the island also become friends to Claire, especially Elaine Whaley, Lula Mikell, and Isabel Compton. How do you think each of these friends were a help to Claire?

8. Elaine's younger children Chuck, Jane, and Emma, and Lula's youngest J.T. soon become friends with Mary Helen and Suki. What sorts of games and activities did all these children enjoy living on a coastal island? Who was Gracie Byrd and how did she cause problems among the children? How did Claire get involved in keeping Lula and Elaine's children for part of the summer? What characteristics and talents of Claire's made her a good—and popular—sitter with the children? How did Andrew mix in with the children on his visits to Edisto? What special bond did he and Suki develop?

9. Who is Miles Lawrence and how does Claire meet him? What is Miles' occupation and where does he live and work? Miles is attracted to Claire and also intrigued by her as a psychologist. Why? How does he push Claire to examine her life in new ways? Why is this upsetting and confusing to Claire? What did you think about his methods, both professionally and personally? How does Miles gradually grow closer to Claire and her girls? What episode with Miles pushes Claire toward accepting her father's counsel to come home with him to Arlington?

10. Are Claire and the girls happy in their move to Arlington? Why or why not? Is Parker happy that Claire has moved back to live with her parents? How did Parker's feelings toward Claire change from the time of the funeral until she left Edisto? Why was he upset to have these feelings and reluctant to reveal them to anyone? When Elaine and Isabel learn that Claire and the girls are unhappy, they push Parker to go to Arlington to encourage her to come back to Edisto. What job does Isabel offer to encourage Claire to come back? What offer does Parker learn from Miles that he thinks may also help encourage Claire to come back?

11. Giftings and talents in children often show up early. What gifting did Suki have? When Charles and Claire recognized it how did they try to encourage it? What hindrances later came for Suki taking lessons with Ms. Najinski? How did Suki meet Morgan Dillon and begin taking lessons with him? What happened at her first big recital? Why did she freeze? How did Andrew help her in that moment? Early in the book, several people note that Mary Helen is really smart. In seriousness and fun, what gifting does Isabel later say Mary Helen has? How does this gift show when Mary Helen helps Isabel in her store The Little Mermaid? Did you have gifts and

talents that showed up early in your life? Do you think they were well encouraged and celebrated? Do you think Claire's gifts and talents were celebrated in her early home life?

12. After Claire's return to Edisto from Arlington her first children's book is published by Whittier the next fall. What is this first book in her new series called? How had the idea for these books developed? What other books do you later learn her publisher is interested in? Where did the idea for these books evolve? Why is Claire worried about the publication of her book and her expected book tour? How does Isabel help her with this and with Claire's first book launch? Where is it held? What two problems happen at the book launch and how are they resolved?

13. Aggie Mosely Houston, the Hampton family housekeeper, played an important role in Claire's upbringing. Did you like Aggie? How did Aggie impact Claire's early life? What things did she teach her? When Claire returns to her family home, how is Aggie a support and help to her again? What personal and spiritual advice does she give Claire about her situation? Aggie claims God always has a plan, even if we don't understand it or see it all at once. Do you think that's true?

14. How does Claire move into a more serious relationship with Miles Lawrence when she returns to the island? Why do you think she and the girls are so attracted to Miles? What things does Miles do and say that lead Claire, Mary Helen, and Suki to all think he's more serious than he is? What happens to show them this isn't so? How is Isabel a help? In what way do Ezra and Parker both confront Miles?

15. Why did Claire's sister Marilyn come to visit with her toward the close of the book? How did Marilyn act differently from in the past? What did you learn about Marilyn and her life? What did she ask Claire's advice about? This visit, despite its positive aspects, continued to point out the differences between Claire and her family. Do you have family members whose beliefs and lives are very different from yours? How have these differences caused difficulties and misunderstandings over the years? Have you also seen small resolutions occur over time?

16. Isabel comes to see if Claire and the girls want to evacuate with her and Ezra as Hurricane Frances advances toward the South Carolina coast. What problems does Isabel warn Claire that might occur? What has Claire decided to do if the storm gets worse? What fears do Claire and the girls have as the danger increases and the storm draws closer? In Beaufort, as Parker's worries increase about Claire and the girls, what does he decide to do? How does Pete help with this? Have you ever been at the coast when a major hurricane hit? Would you stay or evacuate?

17. When an emotional scene occurs, when Parker comes to pick up Claire and the girls, their feelings for each other come out in the open? What are Parker's thoughts about it? What are Claire's? Why do they neither one talk about their feelings but instead try to go on as before? Why doesn't this work? How is their relationship changed after the hurricane? What does Claire decide she needs to do? What does

Parker do when he learns Claire plans to move? How does he act? Often when two people are swirling in the midst of emotions, they can't seem to see their personal situations clearly. How does Miles provoke Claire to consider her situation in another way. Why does she dismiss his advice? How do Ezra and Pete do the same for Parker? What happens when Parker finally shares with Claire how he feels?

18. What characters did you like most in this book? Why did you especially identify with these characters or like the scenes involving them? Knowing this is the first book in a continuing trilogy, what characters do you hope you might meet again in future books? Mary Helen, now grown, will be the main character in the second book RETURN TO EDISTO while Suki will be the main character in the third EDISTO SONG. What do you think Mary Helen and Suki will be like when they are older?