

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for *Return to Edisto*

1. As the story begins, Mary Helen is returning to Edisto Island. What has happened in her life that caused her to leave her home and job in New Jersey suddenly? Why does she choose to come to Edisto? Do you have a place you go—or yearn to go to—when life becomes painful and difficult? Have you ever gone back home again during a hard season?
2. There is a strong bond between Mary Helen and her younger sister Suki. Where is Suki living as this book begins? Mary Helen says to Suki: “Playing piano is your happy place.” Why does she say this and what is Suki doing with her life right now? How are Suki and Mary Helen similar and yet very different? If you have a sister, or sisters, are you close?
3. J.T. (Jenkins Townsend) Mikell is not someone Mary Helen wants to run into on her first night at Edisto—or on any night. Why? Even when J.T. drops by the house on his way home, Mary Helen tries to get rid of him. Why does J.T. stay anyway? How does he help Mary Helen on a difficult night? What was J.T. and Mary Helen’s earlier relationship like growing up? What has their relationship been like since she left home to go to college? What is J.T. doing with his life now and what does he feel about seeing Mary Helen again?
4. Mary Helen has been sexually threatened by her boss. What was her experience? What did she do after Wendell Hembree threatened her? Statistics, at the time these questions were written, reveal that every seventy-three seconds an American is sexually assaulted, and one in six American women has been the victim of rape or an attempted rape in her lifetime, with young women the most likely to experience sexual threat. And yet rape and sexual threat is the most unreported crime. Why do you think this is so? What did Mary Helen do after Wendell Hembree threatened her? Do you think she made the right decision to leave and not confront the company owners about what happened?
5. It is obvious from early in the book that Mary Helen and J.T. have a history together. What did you learn over the book’s story about how they met and first fell in love? What caused them to break up? What factors kept them from resolving this old issue when they both obviously still held feelings for each other? The word “trust,” listed as the foundation stone of any relationship, is often used linked to their problems. How has trust been lost between them? Why do you think this is so? Why is it hard to rebuild trust after it is lost?
6. Mary Helen has a long-time relationship with her neighbor Isabel Compton, owner of The Little Mermaid. When did Isabel and Mary Helen meet? How did they become bonded over the years? What help does Isabel offer to Mary Helen when she comes back to Edisto? How is she a good friend and wise counselor to Mary Helen throughout this story? One of Isabel’s lines of wisdom was: “We don’t always know everything about others, even when we think we do.” Do you think that’s true? How is Ezra Compton also a help to J.T.?
7. If you read *Claire at Edisto*, the first of this trilogy, you met many of the characters in this book before. What changes have happened in Claire’s life since the last book? Claire had

started to write children's books in the first novel. Has she continued in that work? What books has she written since? Did any changes from the last book to this surprise you?

8. Good friends are always a blessing. J.T. is friends with Leon Johnson, his assistant manager at work, and with two old friends from childhood Chuck Whaley and Andrew Cavanaugh. How are his friendships different with each young man? In addition, Mary Helen reunites with her old childhood friend, Jane Whaley Edings. How have Mary Helen's and Jane's lives gone in different directions? Yet they rebond quickly. Do you think there is something special about long time friends we've known since our youth?

9. J.T. and Mary Helen have also known Gracie Byrd since childhood, but there are no warm feelings lingering for Gracie. Why has Gracie always been a problem to Mary Helen and J.T.? Although many people outgrow their childhood issues, Gracie has not. What are her emotional issues and how have they negatively impacted her life and the lives of others? What problems does she cause going to the Little Mermaid to see Mary Helen early in the book? What problems does she cause later when J.T. and Mary Helen are engaged? Did you change any of your feelings about Gracie toward the end of the book?

10. If you are a parent, you know that there is a thin, fine line you have to walk in giving advice about the love relationships of young adult children. What did you think of J.T.'s mother—Lula Mikell's—talk with him about Mary Helen? In addition, Mary Helen's mother, Claire, also has two sweet talks with her about J.T., one at the Little Mermaid and one later in Beaufort when Mary Helen comes home upset. How did Claire help Mary Helen, and Lula help J.T., at these times? Can you recall a time when one of your parents gave you good advice you really needed?

11. Charisma is a social gift that even psychologists have a hard time explaining, but we have all known men and women who have it—and project it. Sexual charisma is an even more enigmatic gift but it often explains the boy all the girls swoon over or the girl all the boys go running after. Social gifts, like charisma, can be both a blessing and a curse. J.T. and his father, John Mikell, along with Miles Lawrence, all possess that special charisma with women. What problems has it caused for them? Have you ever known anyone with this gift? How can the general gift of charisma be a favorable blessing?

12. While some people have charisma and draw us to them, others have the opposite effect. Winnifred Meggett is one of those people. Even though she is smart and knowledgeable, she has earned the nickname Wacky Winnie. Why? How can people who get too fervent about causes begin to push others away rather than drawing them in? Many, fervent in their beliefs, can become extremists in political, environmental, or other views. It isn't the causes they support that tip them over the edge to extremism but the accompanying rejection of good values that they leave behind. What causes does Winnifred support and what values does she begin to reject to support them?

13. The person or persons causing the poisoning of dogs in this book was a primary mystery in the story. How did you feel about this situation as you began to read about dogs on Edisto being poisoned? Did you have any sense early on in the book as to who was causing this problem? Did you think, like Mary Helen, and most others, that the mystery

was solved when the robbers were caught later in the book? Were some of the dogs themselves also problematic in their behavior? What is good etiquette for dogs and owners? How did J.T. help to resolve this situation once and for all?

14. A major life decision we all face is what career path to choose. Often the path demands a sacrifice of time and money for education or training, moves to where a career takes us, and difficult family decisions to make. How did J.T. and Mary Helen differ in knowing the career path they wanted to take? It often helps in life to have someone who believes in you and encourages your choices. Did Mary Helen and J.T. respect each others' choices? How did their differences cause problems in their relationship early on and as the story progressed? Did you know at an early point in life exactly what you wanted to do, or did it take time and trials to find your way? Who believed in you and encouraged you?

15. Illness and accidents interrupt the planned order of our lives. When Mary Helen falls through the porch floor at the old Mikell plantation and brakes her arm, what plans of hers are interrupted? How was J.T. a good help at the time of this accident and after? How did his kindness in this difficult time begin to change Mary Helen's feelings for him? Have you ever broken an arm, leg, or had an accident that greatly disrupted your life?

16. Faith can always be a help and comfort in our lives, but we too often lean to it after we've first tried to figure everything out for ourselves. Kizzy Helton is a good spiritual help to Mary Helen and J.T. in this story. How did she give good counsel to Mary Helen at the grocery when she first arrived on the island and later to both Mary Helen and J.T. after Mary Helen broke her arm? Another Helton family member, Kizzy's son Farlin Helton, also prays for Mary Helen at his church. J.T. seems to comfortably accept that the Helton's, as he puts it, "live close to God" and that 'Farlin Helton has God's ear.' He respects their counsel and 'walk with the Lord.' Do you believe some people live closer to God than others and that because of this they hear better from God than others?

17. Sometimes unexpected events—and people—can greatly impact our lives. Mad and angry at J.T. toward the end of the book, Mary Helen is packing to leave the island to return to New Jersey. What unexpected call set her on that path? As she's packing, Gracie Byrd shows up invited and insists on talking to her. What does Gracie say to her? While reeling from this unexpected visit, Jane calls, in labor, and Mary Helen heads off to take her friend to the hospital. In culmination to all these events, a lady Mary Helen has never met before talks to her in the hospital courtyard, saying something that causes Mary Helen to re-examine the course of her life. What did the lady say? What did Mary Helen then do afterward? Have you ever met a stranger that said something to you that helped to change the course of your thoughts and life?

18. This book could have ended in several different ways. Were you happy with its ending? What offer that Isabel presented earlier in the story made it easier for Mary Helen to decide to stay at Edisto? Did you like the final scenes with Mary Helen and J.T. in the restaurant? What did you like best about this book and which character was your favorite? Who do you hope you might meet again in the next book about Suki's life?

