

Further Reading

Dig
A.S. King (2019)
TEEN KING

Five white teenage cousins who are struggling with the failures and racial ignorance of their dysfunctional parents and their wealthy grandparents, reunite for Easter.

The Reserve
Russell Banks (2008)
BANKS

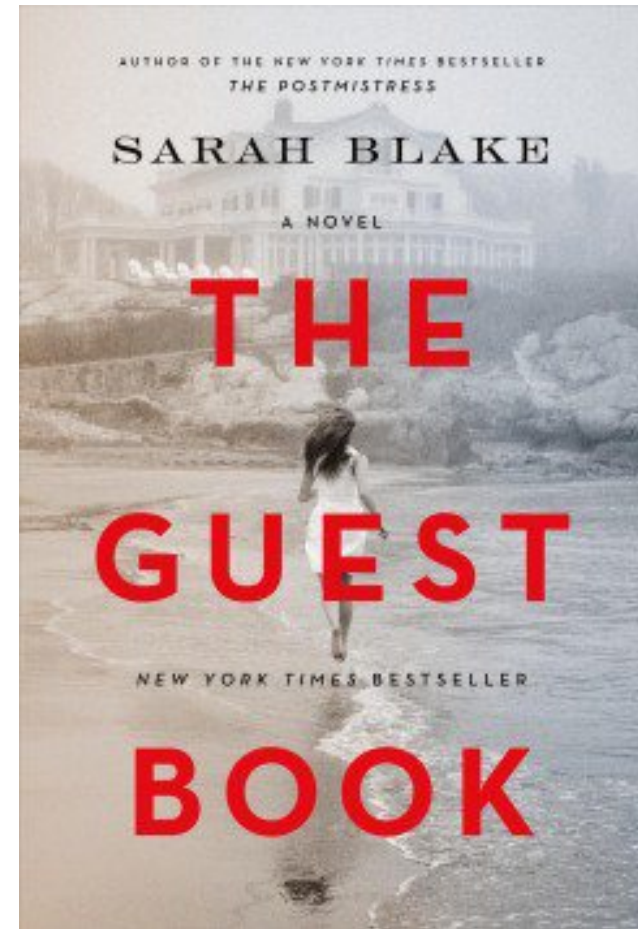
Losing her father to a heart attack on the same night she meets a politically liberal artist, scandal-marked heiress Vanessa Cole hides a dark family secret that takes her from the Adirondacks to war-torn Europe and threatens everyone she encounters.

Land of Love and Drowning
Tiphonie Yanique (2014)
YANIQUE

Chronicles the families of three siblings who survived a shipwreck off the Virgin Islands in 1916 and raised three generations on the islands, adapting to the unique language, rhythm and magic of island life over 60 years.

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Book Discussion Guide



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About the Book

Blake tells the history of the privileged Milton family from 1935 to present day in this powerful family saga. In 1935 New York, Kitty Milton is enjoying the life of a New York society wife with her three children—five-year-old Neddy, three-year-old Moss, and one-year-old Joan—when Neddy dies in an accident. To help his wife heal, Ogden buys Crockett's Island off the coast of Maine, and through the decades, the island becomes the Miltons' summer refuge. In 1959, Moss is working in his father's investment bank and invites his Jewish friend Len Levy, a fellow employee at the firm, and Reg Pauling, a black man and friend of Moss and Len, to visit the island. Len and Joan have been secretly dating, but Len isn't certain if Joan will acknowledge their relationship in front of her family.

Discussion Questions

1. Evie teaches her students that "[h]istory is sometimes made by heroes, but it is also always made by us. We, the people, who stumble around, who block or help the hero out of loyalty, stubbornness, faith, or fear. The people watching—the crowd." Do you agree with her? How do the characters in this novel shape history? And whose history do they shape?
2. Central to Paul's academic work is the idea that "there is the crime and there is the silence." Do you think Ogden was right to not divest from Nazi Germany and try to work within the regime? Was this a version of silence that Paul is criticizing? What kinds of silences do we reproduce in our lives in this country now?
3. During her trip to America, Elsa tells Mrs. Lowell: "*Forgive me... but it is a mistake to think news happens somewhere else. To others. The news is always about you. You must simply fit yourself in it. You must see how—you must be vigilant.*" Do you agree? How does her warning resonate for each generation of Miltons? Do you think the author is consciously echoing Evie with what she tells her students (question #1) in referencing "you"? And if so, what does the author suggest about collective responsibility?

4. Evie says of her parents' generation that they seem to have "inherited their days rather than chosen them, made do with what they had, and so they peopled the rooms rather than lived in them, ghosting their own lives." Is that a fair assessment? Discuss the similarities and differences between the various generations of Miltons in this novel in relation to what they have been given.

5. At Evelyn's engagement, Ogden toasts: *Behind every successful man is a good woman... Or so the saying goes. But I suggest a good woman is the reason men put up walls and gardens, churches. The reason men build at all. At the center of every successful man is a good woman.* How do you read this in light of Evie's thesis about the anchoress? Discuss the gender dynamics at play in the different marriages in this novel.

6. Moss describes to Reg the experience of seeing *A Raisin in the Sun*: "It was the first time I'd ever seen my own story on the stage... To see something, to want it that bad. To want and want and know that it's impossible—it's impossible." What do you think about Moss, a privileged white man, making a claim like that regarding a seminal play about the experience of African Americans?

7. What does Crockett's Island represent for each generation of Miltons? Discuss the pros and cons of Evie's generation fighting to keep the island or let it go. In what ways can a place both bind and define us? And how does the story we tell about ourselves connect to that place? Does your family have a place with a similar kind of significance?

8. At the end of the novel, Reg asks Evie what she will do with the island now that she knows its more complicated truths. She says, "I don't know," and he answers, "That's a start." What do you think he means? What has started? What is the novel asking about the relation between knowledge of the past and responsibility to one another in the present? How does Reg's response ask us to think about what we do once we see the full story (or history) of a place?

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