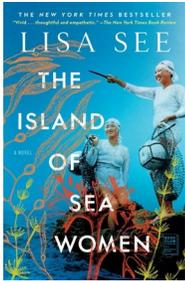


# Books by the Stack



## *The Island of Sea Women* by Lisa See

While working as divers with the all-female diving collective on a small Korean island, Mi-ja and Young-sook find their friendship challenged by their differences and forces outside their control.

**Why you'll like it:** *Historical fiction. Richly detailed. Atmospheric.*

**About the Author:** Lisa See was born in Paris but grew up in Los Angeles, spending much of her time in Chinatown. She is of Chinese descent. Her first book, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family* (1995), was a national bestseller and a New York Times Notable Book. Her first fiction novel, *Flower Net* (1997) was a national bestseller, a New York Times Notable Book, and on the Los Angeles Times Best Books List for 1997. Her bestselling novels, all inspired by her Chinese heritage, include *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *A Peony in Love*, *Shanghai Girls*, *Dreams of Joy* and *China Dolls*. See serves as a Los Angeles City Commissioner.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The story begins with Young-sook as an old woman, gathering algae on the beach. What secrets or clues about the past and the present are revealed in the scenes that take place in 2008? Why do we only understand the beginning of the novel after we have finished it?
2. When Young-sook and Mi-ja are fifteen, Young-sook's mother says to them: "You are like sisters, and I expect you to take care of each other today and every day as those tied by blood would do." (p. 13) How are these words of warning? The friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja is just one of many examples of powerful female relationships in the novel. Discuss the way in which female relationships are depicted and the important role they play on Jeju.
3. On page 17, Young-sook's mother recites a traditional haenyeo aphorism: *Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back*. But she also says the sea is like a mother. (p. 22) Then, on page 71, Grandmother says, "The ocean is better than your natal mother. The sea is forever." How do these contradictory ideas play out in the novel? What do they say about the dangerous work of the haenyeo?
4. In many ways, the novel is about blame, guilt, and forgiveness.. In the first full chapter, Yu-ri has her encounter with the octopus. What effect does this incident have on various characters moving forward: Mother, Young-sook, Mi-ja, Do-seang, Gu-ja, Gu-sun, and Ju-bu? Young-sook is also involved in the tragic death of her mother. To what extent is she responsible for these sad events? Is her sense of guilt justified?
5. Later, on page 314, Clara recites a proverb attributed to Buddha: *To understand everything is to forgive*. Considering the novel as a whole, do you think this is true? Young-sook's mother must forgive herself for Yu-ri's accident, Young-sook must forgive herself for her mother's death, Gu-sun forgives Gu-ja for Wan-

soon's death. On a societal level, the people of Jeju also needed to find ways to forgive each other. While not everyone on Jeju has found forgiveness, how and why do you think those communities, neighbors, and families have been able to forgive? Do you think *anything* can be forgiven eventually? Should it? Does Young-sook take too long to forgive given what she witnessed?

6. Mi-ja carries the burden of being the daughter of a Japanese collaborator. Is there an inevitability to her destiny just as there's an inevitability to Young-sook's destiny? Another way of considering this aspect of the story is, are we responsible for the sins of our fathers (or mothers)? Later in the novel, Young-sook will reflect on all the times Mi-ja showed she was the daughter of a collaborator. She blames Yo-chan for being Mi-ja's son, as well as the grandson of a Japanese collaborator. Was Young-sook being fair, or had her eyes and heart been too clouded?
7. The haenyeo are respected for having a matrifocal culture – a society focused on women. They work hard, have many responsibilities and freedoms, and earn money for their households, but how much independence and power within their families and their cultures do they really have? Are there other examples from the story that illustrate the independence of women, but also their subservience?
8. What is life like for men married to haenyeo? Compare Young-sook's father, Mi-ja's husband, and Young-sook's husband?
9. On page 189, there is mention of haenyeo from a different village rowing by Young-sook's collective to share gossip. How fast did information travel around the island and from the mainland? Was the Five-Day Market a good source of gossip or were there other places more ideal? On page 201, Jun-bu mentions his concern about believing information broadcast on the radio, "...but can we trust anything we hear?" Were there specific instances when information broadcast on the radio was misleading or false? What impacts how people hear and interpret the news?
10. Confucianism has traditionally played a lesser role on Jeju than elsewhere in Korea, while Shamanism is quite strong. What practical applications does Shamanism have for the haenyeo? Do the traditions and rituals help the haenyeo conquer the fear and anxieties about the dangerous work they do? Does it bring comfort during illness, death, and other tragedies? Does Young-sook ever question her beliefs, and why?
11. On page 39, Young-sook's mother recites the aphorism *If you plant red beans, then you will harvest red beans*. Ju-bu repeats the phrase on page 199. How do these two characters interpret the saying? How does this saying play out for various characters?
12. At first it would seem that the visit of the scientists to the island is something of a digression. What important consequences does it have for Young-sook and the other haenyeo?
13. The aphorism "*Deep roots remain tangled underground*," is used to describe Young-sook's and Mi-ja's friendship, and it becomes especially true when it's revealed that their children, Joon-lee and Yo-chan are getting married. How else does the aphorism manifest itself on Jeju, especially in the context of the islanders' suffering and shared trauma? Do you think it's true that we cannot remove ourselves from the connections of our pasts?
14. On page 120, Young-sook's mother-in-law, Do-Saeng, says "There's modern, and then there's tradition." How does daily life on Jeju change between 1938 and 2008? Discuss architecture, the arrival of the scientists and the studies they conduct, the introduction of wet suits and television, etc. How does Young-sook reconcile her traditional *haenyeo* way of life with the encroaching modern world? Do you think it's possible to modernize without sacrificing important traditional values?
15. The characters have lived through Japanese colonialism, the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the Korean War, the 4.3 Incident and the Vietnam War. How do these larger historical events impact the characters and island life?

**16.** Mi-ja's rubbings are crucial to the novel. How do they illustrate the friendship between Mi-ja and Young-sook? How do they help Young-sook in her process of healing?

*(Questions provided by the author)*



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