

BOOK CLUB KIT



“A pure joyride. Sweet, witty, poignant, filled with intrigue and unlikely friendship, it’s a perfect escape. I loved it.”

–**LISA WINGATE**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Before We Were Yours* and *The Book of Lost Friends*



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do the various members of Margery's family—her father, her mother, her aunts, Barbara—inform who she is as a person? What values and beliefs, good and bad, do they pass along to her?
2. How do Margery's core beliefs—about herself, about the world—change throughout the novel?
3. When Margery stole the boots, what was your initial reaction? What do you think the boots represent to her?
4. How does Margery and Enid's relationship evolve? How do they complement each other as characters? How do they learn from and change each other?
5. Why do you think Mr. Mundic fixated on Margery to the point that he followed her to New Caledonia? What does the journey mean to him? What similarities, if any, do Margery and Mundic share?
6. How did you envision Margery's helmet? It has its own presence in most scenes of the book; what does it represent to you?
7. What characters did you find yourself identifying with most? Do you think your personality is more aligned with Margery's or Enid's? Which would you want as a friend?
8. Do you think Freya will actually go to New Caledonia? What about Margery and Gloria's story do you think inspired her?
9. What does the golden beetle mean to Margery? Do you have a "golden beetle" in your own life? If so, what is it and what does it mean to you?
10. What did you think was going to be in the red valise? Were you surprised when it was finally opened?



BEETLE FACTS

Here are just a few mind-boggling facts about beetles.

1. 25% of all life on earth is a type of beetle.
2. Fireflies are technically beetles.
3. A beetle can detect a fire from nearly 50 miles away, 10,000 times the distance of man-made fire detectors.
4. A beetle is made of one material, chitin. It is extremely versatile: Strong, waterproof, allows air to pass through it, and can become different colors.
5. Fisherman in some parts of the world use fireflies as beacons when finding their way through the oceans and down rivers. These tiny beetles grow so bright they can guide ships.

Source: <https://blog.ted.com/7-talks-that-contain-fascinating-facts-about-beetles/>



AN INTERVIEW

WITH MARGERY BENSON AND ENID PRETTY

RACHEL JOYCE: It's very kind of you to both to speak to me today. I appreciate the distance you've had to travel—not just physically but also spiritually—in order to make this happen.

MARGERY BENSON: It's a pleasure.

ENID PRETTY: And anyway, it's nice to get a change of scene.

RJ: I think it's fair to say your friendship changed your lives—

EP: Oh no. That's it. I'm crying already—

RJ: —but what did you really think of one another when you first met?

MB: I am not spoiling anything by saying it wasn't the best circumstances in which to meet a person for the first time. I thought she was awful.

They laugh.

EP: Looking back, I was the last person Marge needed.

MB: You were the last person I *thought* I needed.

EP: I was on the run. I was in shock. But Marge saved my life, right from the start. And I had watched her for a

while, you know, on the station concourse. My first thought was how is this going to work? But I am an optimist. I try to make the best of things.

RJ: For me, a turning point is where you see yourself in a shop window, Margery, and realize you like yourself. Until that point, it seems to me, you've avoided seeing who you really are.

EP: I love that moment. It makes me so proud of Marge.

MB: It takes a long time for some people to face their reflection and like what they see.

EP: Oh, I agree. There's such pressure on women to look like something they're not. You know. To try and turn themselves into someone else.

RJ: Does that include dyeing your hair?

EP: Of course it doesn't. Dyeing your hair is fun.

RJ: So what were the turning points for you, Enid?

EP: A real low point for me was what happened on the RMS *Orion*. It felt like everything was over.

MB: I behaved so badly. I am still ashamed to think about that day.



EP: Yes, it hurt terribly that you abandoned me. But looking back, I don't see how you could have responded in any other way. You didn't know how to at that point.

MB: It was only in meeting you that I learnt how.

EP: Same for me, Marge.

RJ: Any other moments that took you by surprise?

MB: Obviously finding out the truth about Enid's past was a big turning point, though deep down I think I'd known for a while that something terrible had happened. But there were other turning points that—even though they might seem smaller—had a deeper impact. Finding Enid at the camp in Waco and realizing that money was not enough was a big turning point. I realized I wanted to be the kind of woman who could be a friend to another woman. I also believed it was too late.

EP: It was the same for me. I realized I had to take a risk and follow you to New Caledonia. Relying on a man to get me through was not the answer. Or rather, it wasn't the answer I wanted for myself any more.

RJ: What does friendship mean to you?

MB: My feelings about friendship changed during the course of knowing Enid. I realized that before meeting Enid, I spent a lot of my time trying to throw people off the scent. It was as if I had a mask on top of my face—and it's also true that I couldn't bear to see my face.

EP: So sad.

MB: I was always cutting my head out of photographs. But Enid was not the kind of woman who respects boundaries. That was a big lesson for me.

EP: And you have to be able to disagree.

MB: Also, surprises. Enid is the person I know best in the world, and she is certainly the person who knows me best. But she never does what I expect.

EP: All I am saying here is . . . mules. That's all I'm saying.

RJ: What about you, Enid?

EP: It's funny. I knew loads of people before I met Marge but I never met someone who was so solid.

MB: Solid! That's a good word for it! And I'm even more solid now.

EP: I needed to become more like Margery, and I guess Marge needed a touch more Enid.

MB: I still can't wear pink, though.

EP: You can't. No offense, Marge, but it isn't your color.

They laugh so much they have to hold hands.

MB: The thing about friendship is that you can't have that kind of love with everyone you meet. A true friendship requires that you put in time. And you have to be prepared to go the whole journey.



RJ: Men don't come out of this adventure especially well. There's a view that they are just stereotypes of the worst kind of masculinity. Do you think that's a problem?

MB: 1950 was a time of terrible lowness after two world wars. Both men and women had suffered, and in different ways. There were men too who had seen such terrible things they couldn't come back from them.

EP: The society we lived in felt so narrow, we had no choice but to escape.

MB: Besides, there are plenty of stories where men go off on adventures.

EP: Yes, if men are unhappy, they can read those!

RJ: What do you feel about the end of the novel?

MB: It still breaks my heart.

EP: To be honest, I haven't read it.

MB: The quality of a life is defined not by its length, but by its depth, its actions, and achievements. It is defined by

our ability to love. By these criteria, Enid did a very good job with the years she was given. And I was lucky. I was lucky to get the chance to love someone so much. Every year that she is not with me, her memory becomes simpler, and I hate that.

EP: I seriously must read the ending.

MB: Seriously. I don't think you should.

RJ: Can you tell us what happened to Gloria? Did Freya find her? Did she find the gold beetle?

EP: (*laughing*) You want us to tell you *everything*?

MB: Some things are just what they are, as well as being a being a sign of something more. I once found a dead blue bird. It was the most beautiful thing, and so delicate. I said to myself, "Do you think it's a sign? Or just a dead bird?" It was only years later it occurred to me it was both a sign and a dead bird. Sometimes we have to live in the mystery.

EP: Oh that's lovely.



AN INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL JOYCE

You were first inspired to write about a golden beetle by an interview on BBC Radio 4. Can you tell us a little more?

I was in my car. I was listening to an interview about cryptozoology, which is in essence the search for animals whose existence has not yet been proved. The interviewer was giving the poor man a really hard time, almost laughing; so of course I felt empathy for him, especially when he said yes, he truly believed in the Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster. I began thinking about how you would look for a creature that hasn't yet been found. And it struck me that as well as imagination—to think beyond what you know—it would also take knowledge, and tremendous courage.

I knew this was a story about renewal, and in ancient Egyptian mythology the beetle is the symbol of exactly that. Just like the sun that sets in the dark and then rises again, the scarab lays its eggs in a ball of dung and rolls it to a burrow, until the new beetle finally slips out.

Bingo. I would send a woman on the trail of a golden beetle that no one had found.

Was it essential for the beetle to be in New Caledonia? Could this story have been set anywhere else?

New Caledonia is rich in minerals, flora, fauna, and insect life. Having said that, the book could have been set anywhere in the world—originally it was supposed to be set in the UK, but that felt too close to what I know, and then France, but so many novels have already been successfully set there. I wanted to put myself and my characters (and my reader) beyond the confines of what we knew. I wanted to make my imagination really work hard.

Margery is just three years younger the year in which we find her. She is forty-seven. We begin in 1950. She is the product of her age. What made you decide on 1950?

1950 was a time of collective exhaustion after two terrible world wars. I began to read and think about all the women who went through the First World War as children, and lost fathers, brothers, uncles, only to be confronted by the Second World War where they lost husbands, fiancés, friends.

My grandmother married a man she didn't love because the man she loved had been killed. I had an Aunty Edith who wasn't really an aunt but who must have been one of my grandmother's unmarried friends. She too would have been a similar age to Margery. She lived with her sister, who was unwell. (She wrote me letters in which she called me "The Window Girl" because I liked watching from my window.) I know her life was hard.



In so many ways Margery and Enid are polar opposites. And yet by the end of the novel it is almost as if they have merged. They have taken on each other's characteristics. Does this say more about aspects of femininity or friendship?

In order to find the thing they want, Enid needs to find the Margery inside her, and Margery needs to find her Enid. They need one another in order to become the thing they want to be.

This is true of all of us. In order to become who we are truly are, we need to embrace the parts of ourselves that are hidden and underdeveloped.

How much do you feel your central women characters—Margery, Enid and, perhaps even Mrs. Pope—are defined by early relationships with men?

I do not believe they are defined *purely* by the men they have met. They certainly have been shaped by them in some ways. But I think that who these women are comes from where they began. Margery has a mother in mourning, and an adored father who chose to kill himself. After that she has only her mother's silence and her aunts' refusal to discuss anything whatsoever. She does not know how to say what she feels. She doesn't really even know how to feel it.

Enid is cagey about her beginnings. We know she lost her parents at a young age. We know she was passed between families and possibly abused.

And Mrs. Pope was not given the opportunity in life to make mistakes or follow her creative path. The theater did not happen for her—she was probably an appalling actress—but she had an instinct to speak Shakespeare, to *play*, and that was taken away from her.

Having said this, there is no doubt in my mind that a woman like Margery would have been deeply wounded by her relationship with the professor. (And I, of course, am asking myself why she chose to fall in love with an older man, about the same age as her father.) A damaged relationship is not something to be taken lightly.

It is her instinct, her unconscious will to survive, that makes her pick up those great big boots and walk out of her awful life.

Primarily this a book about women and yet Mr. Mundic plays such an important role. Was he always in this story? What is his role?

Mr. Mundic came to the story all by himself. I didn't invite him. I had a lot of difficulties writing the chapter where Margery interviews her applicants—in particular, her second applicant (a demobbed soldier) who was simply supposed to turn up for the interview, make a hash of it, and then leave the book, thank you very much. He kept



demanding my attention, until he had way too much book-space for a walk-on part. Then I got up early one morning and began to write a chapter about a man following Margery—I was just going with some sort of instinct—and there it was; I saw he was the man in the teashop who wouldn't stay small.

He is a narcissist. He believes everything revolves around him. He is dangerous because he has seen too much horror to know how to fit back into a civilized place.

There is a Post-It note stuck to the window above my desk. It says, "Without powerful opposition storytelling is trite." On the whole, I think it comes from a place of doubt inside us, but Mundic is a powerful foil to Margery. Like her, he comes from a place of disconnection. Unlike her, he does not overcome it.

And by the way, Mundic is a term used for building blocks made of waste mining material. They are not stable.

Can you tell us anything about your writing process?

When I start to write a story it's like finding an empty house in the middle of a wood, where the doors and windows are barred, and there's no way in. So I circle it and I circle it, and eventually maybe I find a little crack, the smallest opening. When I am writing a book, it is with me all the time. It calls my attention, even when I am asleep.

I don't write in a linear way. I can't. So I just listen to what comes up. And by the end I have a load of ideas and little scenes and observations and I begin to try to see how they might fit together. Finding the beginning is the milestone—the moment you understand how to guide the reader into a story. It's such a relief when you find that. And I often write the end way before I have arrived there. For me, the beginning and the ending are directly related; one is a call to the other. I just have no idea how I'm going to get there.





FOOD

BOUGNA

According to Gourmetpedia.net, “Bougna is the traditional dish of Melanesians: the ingredients are wrapped in banana leaves and enclosed in an oven made from hot rocks.” It’s a bit of an involved process, taking up to two hours to cook, but if you really want to impress your book club guests, this is the dish to try.

Bougna is a kind of chicken, fish, or flying fox stew that includes taro, sweet potato, plantain, tomato, and yam.

To read more about Kanak cooking, visit NewCaledonia.Travel.



Source: <http://gourmetpedia.net/recipes/bougna/>

Ingredients (depending on availability)

- chicken
- fish
- taro
- sweet potatoes
- Poingo bananas or plantains
- tomatoes
- yam

Material required

- Banana leaves

Method

Choose a young banana leaf with a central rib that is not too thick. Place the leaf over an open flame, turning it several times so that it softens up as it browns. The cut-up ingredients are then piled on the leaf and moistened with coconut milk. The banana leaf is carefully folded close and securely tied with vines.

The Kanak oven

1. Start a fire with twigs and coconut fiber.
2. Place some dry wooden branches over the fire to create a platform.
3. Place the stones evenly around the fire. Stoke the fire and wait.
4. When the stones are hot, move them aside and set the bougna to cook.
5. Cover with the stones and freshly cut leafy branches.
6. Cover with earth and cook for about 2 hours.
7. Remove the earth and stones to uncover the bougnas.

Serve the bougna right in the banana leaves, opened up attractively and decorated with flowers.



DRINKS



NON-ALCOHOLIC

As a nod to Margery and Enid's homeland, serve English Breakfast Tea for a non-alcoholic or morning option. Be sure to have milk and sugar available!

WITH ALCOHOL

New Caledonian restaurants are full of imported French wines. As in France, [according to this gourmet guide to the region](#), people in New Caledonia will drink some red wines chilled—especially refreshing in the warm, tropical climate. Try a Cabernet Franc from the Loire Valley, and [be sure to just chill it](#), popping it into the fridge only for about 30 minutes, so you don't lose any of the flavor.



FURTHER VIEWING

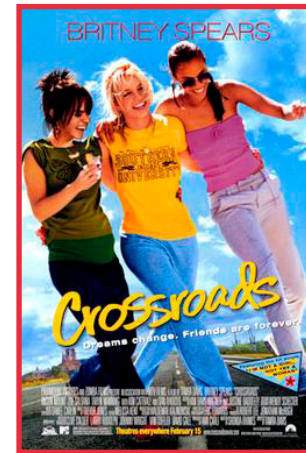
Continue celebrating female friendship—and female adventures—with the movies below.



Thelma and Louise



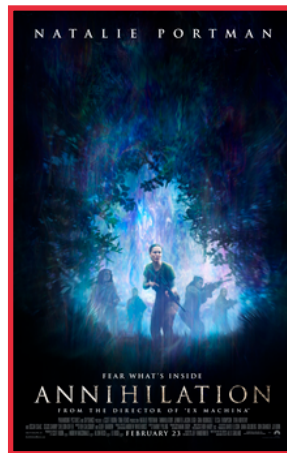
A League of Their Own



Crossroads



Practical Magic



Annihilation



*Romy and Michele's
High School Reunion*

