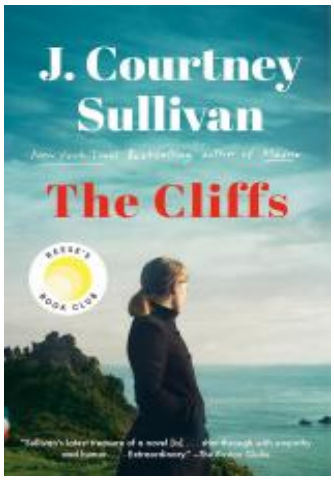
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# The Cliffs

by J. Courtney Sullivan




## About the Book

**A novel of family, secrets, ghosts and homecoming set on the seaside cliffs of Maine, by the *New York Times* bestselling author of FRIENDS AND STRANGERS.**

On a secluded bluff overlooking the ocean sits a Victorian house, lavender with gingerbread trim, a home that contains a century?s worth of secrets. By the time Jane Flanagan discovers the house as a teenager, it has long been abandoned. The place is an irresistible mystery to Jane. There are still clothes in the closets, marbles rolling across the floors and dishes in the cupboards, even though no one has set foot there in decades. The house becomes a hideaway for Jane, a place to escape her volatile mother.

Twenty years later, now a Harvard archivist, she returns home to Maine following a terrible mistake that threatens both her career and her marriage. Jane is horrified to find the Victorian is now barely recognizable. The new owner, Genevieve, a summer person from Beacon Hill, has gutted it, transforming the house into a glossy white monstrosity straight out of a shelter magazine. Strangely, Genevieve is convinced that the house is haunted --- perhaps the product of something troubling Genevieve herself has done. She hires Jane to research the history of the place and the women who lived there. The story Jane uncovers --- of lovers lost at sea, romantic longing, shattering loss, artistic awakening, historical artifacts stolen and sold, and the long shadow of colonialism --- is even older than Maine itself.

Enthralling, richly imagined, filled with psychic mediums and charlatans, spirits and past lives, mothers, marriage and the legacy of alcoholism, this is a deeply moving novel about the land we inhabit, the women who came before us, and the ways in which none of us will ever truly leave this earth.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** THE CLIFFS begins with the limited scope of Jane?s adolescent life. As she recites local history to the passengers on

Abe Adams? lobster boat and navigates the summer program at Bates College, what does she know about the world and her place in it? How does that knowledge change by the end of the novel?

**2.** Why is Jane drawn to the violet-colored Victorian house? What forms of refuge does it provide to her, despite its dilapidated condition?

**3.** Discuss Lake Grove?s rumored curse that the women who move there end up alone. What common threads are shared by the husbands, from Captain Littleton and Herbert Martinson to Paul Richards? Is it a curse to end up alone? Which of the house?s inhabitants were the least lonely?

**4.** What accounts for the differences between Jane and Holly, even though they were raised under the same circumstances? How do their sibling ties compare to Hannah and Agnes?? And to Eliza and Emily?s?

**5.** Despite her intense need to be independent, Jane tries repeatedly to save her marriage. In what ways were she and David a good fit for each other and yet a terrible match? In contrast, Jane thrives on her friendship with Allison. What enables their bond to strengthen over the years?

**6.** What were you predicting for Sister Eliza?s story? How does she serve as a reminder of the voices that remain silent to even the most skilled historical researchers?

**7.** In chapter 16, Brother Michael tells Jane that the goal of the Shaker faith was utopia, adding, ?Imagine what the world could have been had they [the naysayers] listened.? What?s your reaction to that wish?

**8.** Do you believe that the dead can communicate with the living? Is there any harm done at places like Camp Mira?

**9.** Discuss the novel?s many different depictions of motherhood and childhood, including Genevieve?s recounting of her own painful girlhood (page 223). Where does Daisy ultimately lead Jane and Genevieve? If you were Marilyn, would you be able to forgive Mary Flanagan?

**10.** For Mary, her daughter and her granddaughter, what are the legacies of alcoholism? What factors beyond genetics perpetuate it in their family?

**11.** THE CLIFFS is packed with historical artifacts, from the small Indigenous basket to Staffordshire china, the bonnet, the jar of marbles, and many other tangible pieces of the past. To some, the only value that matters is the financial one. What are the other, nonmonetary reasons to preserve and display such artifacts? What are the most cherished possessions in your own family archive? How much do you know about the final resting places of your ancestors? Which of their stories have survived for generations?

**12.** In Naomi?s chapter, with scenes of the first people to encounter the cliff and ascribe a sacred purpose to it, what do we learn about the way conquerors use history to perpetuate their power? What does it take for hidden histories --- including unmarked burial sites --- to be reclaimed and illuminated?

**13.** J. Courtney Sullivan?s storytelling provides a distinctive perspective on life?s turning points. Which turning points resonated with you the most in THE CLIFFS and in her previous novels that you have read?

## Author Bio

J. Courtney Sullivan is the bestselling author of the novels COMMENCEMENT, MAINE, THE ENGAGEMENTS, SAINTS FOR ALL OCCASIONS, FRIENDS AND STRANGERS and THE CLIFFS. Her work has been translated into 17 languages. Sullivan?s writing has appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, *Allure*, *Real Simple* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*, among many others. In 2017, she wrote the forewords to new editions of two of her favorite classic novels --- ANNE OF GREEN GABLES and LITTLE WOMEN. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband and two children.

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