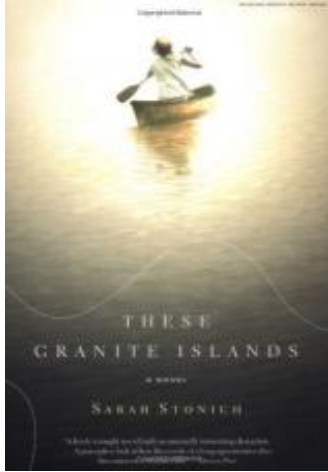


These Granite Islands: A Novel

by Sarah Stonich



About the Book

On her deathbed, Isobel-mother, wife, and hat maker-recalls the haunting and fateful summer of 1936 when her world was transformed. After her husband Victor takes their sons away for the summer to a remote island, Isobel meets Cathryn, a woman who will forever change the way she looks at life. An intimate story of friendship, a portrait of marriage, and a glimpse into the depths of loss, the events of this summer become the prism that refracts the essence of Isobel's life.

Discussion Guide

1. Cathryn and Isobel have a special, yet unusual, friendship. What is it that first draws them to each other? There are many disparities between the two women - why and how does their friendship work? How do they enrich each other's lives? In what ways does Isobel's friendship with Cathryn change her life?
2. Isobel was not only complicit in Cathryn and Jack's affair; she helped them carry it out. Why did she do this even if she believed it was morally wrong?
3. The summer of 1936 was clearly one of the defining moments in Isobel's life. In what ways did her marriage change after this summer? In what ways did her relationships with her children change? In what ways did she herself change?
4. If the story were contemporary, Cathryn's manic illness might have been properly diagnosed and attended to. What other outcomes of the story were dictated by the era?
5. Isobel had always been uneasy in Cypress, and after the disappearance of Jack and Cathryn, her reputation was nearly ruined. Victor had been embraced and revered in the community. How did this particular tension affect their marriage?

6. How did Isobel's and Victor's family histories shape and influence them? As partners in their marriage? As parents to their children?
7. Isobel seems to have deliberately chosen a solitary life after Victor's death. Why? What role might the circumstances of that one summer played in determining that 'choice'?
8. How do the many losses that Isobel suffers affect her in her old age? Does she ultimately resolve these losses? Does she make peace with her memories?
9. What closure, if any, could Thomas derive from his mother's story? How did his own curiosity about the past affect his relationship with his mother?
10. Some questions remain unanswered in the novel, such as Liam's death and how Isobel comes to imagine the fates of Jack and Cathryn. Is it necessary that these questions be resolved? Identify other mysteries and open-ended questions in the book, and discuss how you interpret them.

Author Bio

I started writing relatively late - in my thirties. I've written articles and essays on travel, visual arts, food, and sports. I also write short stories, but currently I'm researching my second novel for Little Brown, a multi-generational saga about a family with members originating from both ends of the Mississippi. Right now it's called "American River", but titles can change with the wind... I've won a couple awards, and that's been a real boost - but even better are the writer's residency programs I've attended - the luxury of having time to write is priceless. I've been to Ragdale, North of Chicago, half a dozen times, and this spring I'll be in Upstate NY at ART OMI. This summer I'll be in Ireland at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre. Last winter I traveled to China on a Jerome Grant to collaborate with a Chinese-American painter on a series of essays. I think travel is especially vital to the writer - and I try to visit a new place whenever I can afford to. When I'm not writing, I'm renovating old houses in the historic section of St. Paul, near the Mississippi. I live just above downtown St. Paul with my 13 year old son, Sam, and my cat, Bald Walter, and while I'd like to think I'd never, ever mention a pet in a bio, he is 22 years old and still catches bats.

Critical Praise

"One of the joys of reading is coming across a book in which language is perfectly wedded to story. These Granite Islands is a marvelous first novel, confronting with humor, bravery, and pathos the manner in which we construct or destroy our various loves."

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