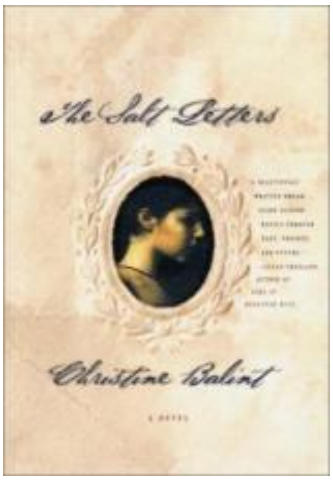
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The Salt Letters: A Novel

by Christine Balint



About the Book

It is 1854, and with the certainty of land behind her, Sarah flees her home for the uncertainties of life in the new colony. In steerage, she joins the other unmarried women, where the horrors of their close confinement bring an unraveling of secrets no one can control. Sarah endures, longing for her mother's forgiveness and the sweetness of her cousin Richard's breath. As she draws closer to her new land, she becomes increasingly haunted by her own tale and the letter home she cannot write. Moving between the voyage in which pigs run through flooded living quarters to the hallucinatory visions induced by heat and doldrums, Christine Balint's astonishing debut novel brings us close to a time when the world was still a place to be discovered. Shortlisted for the Vogel Literary Award.

Discussion Guide

1. Water has been a prominent element in Sarah's life?in her grandfather's profession, in her mother's fear, and of course, on and around the ship as Sarah makes her crossing. What does water symbolize for each of these people? What lies behind Sarah's mother's phobia, and how is that relevant to their relationship? What enables Sarah to conquer her own fear of the water? What does she mean when she says, "I realised I was water" (p. 134) or "I feel that my mind is becoming the ocean floor" (p. 135)? At times on the trip it seems that Sarah is drawn to the water, at other times overwhelmed by it. Which sentiment do you think prevails?

2. Sarah's parents want her to marry Mr. Downing. Arranged marriages of this sort were common in the nineteenth century; if Sarah had acceded to her parents' wishes, could she have been happy? What would a marriage with Mr. Downing have been like? Did her parents have her best interests at heart? In what ways was Mr. Downing the antithesis of Richard? of Sarah?

3. What does the "fish" in Sarah's stomach represent? To the reader? To her? Why does she seem to refer to it as one would refer to an unborn child?

4. Sarah and Richard are first cousins. How do you feel about their romance? Should cousins be allowed to marry, as they were at this time? Were her parents right or wrong to condemn their union? Is Sarah brave to stand up for the life she chooses, or is she deluded not to see the complications that a marriage with Richard might cause? What will happen to Sarah and Richard if they do marry?

5. The unmarried women come to form a sort of family in their berth below deck. How does this compare or contrast with Sarah's real family?or with any of the women's real families? What constitutes a family? What have these women lacked in their past family lives, and will they find it in the New World? Do they find it on the ship?

6. What significance does Sarah's grandmother's hair have? Why did Sarah's mother give it to her?what was she trying to convey? How does seeing the hair change Sarah's understanding of her grandmother and the other women in her family? Why does the hair seem alive to Sarah? Why does she try to get rid of it, and why can't she do so?

7. Why are Sarah and the other unmarried women so fascinated with the story of McGovern, the sailor who jumped overboard with the horses and now supposedly lives underwater? Why did he care about the horses' lives as much as his own, and why does Sarah care so much about the animals on the ship? Why does she free the birds at the end of the book?

8. Discuss the Albatross Man and his strange transformation. When Sarah speaks of him, she seems to do so almost longingly. What does the Albatross Man represent for her and for the other passengers? In Samuel Coleridge's **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner**, the slaying of an albatross brings a curse upon the ship and the ancient Mariner. How does the fate of Coleridge's Mariner compare with that of **The Salt Letters**' Scotsman? Why does literature accord the albatross such power? When the Albatross Man says he will take the unmarried women to paradise, what does he mean? What happens between him and Beth?

9. Why can't Sarah finish the letter to her mother? What do you think she wants to say? The substance and tone of the letter change as the voyage goes on. Why? How does Sarah herself change during the voyage? When she writes to her mother, "I am frightened," what is she frightened of? What power does the written word have that differs from that of the spoken word?

10. Unmarried women in the nineteenth century were treated far differently than were married women. How have things changed since then, and how have they stayed the same? Why did people regard unmarried women as a "lesser" class? Was this a form of protection, or prejudice? (Or both?) How successfully do you think the women in this book coped with such treatment? Do unmarried women still face discrimination? If Sarah had stayed in England, how would her life have turned out? Will her life be better in Australia?

11. Sarah says, "If it is truly possible to live under water then perhaps we will be safer there" (p. 68). Several characters in the novel leap or step overboard into the ocean: McGovern, Charlotte, Matron's husband. Why are they compelled to do so? What does the ocean represent for them? Why is Sarah so intrigued by the plants and animals she sees under the ocean's surface? How does the mysteriousness of the ocean compare with her home environment in England?

12. Sarah says, "The effort of forgetting when there is so much to remember makes me feel that this is a journey I can only make once" (p. 89). What does she mean by that? How is memory fallible? Why would a person choose to forget?

13. Is Sarah a reliable narrator when it comes to Richard? What does he represent for her? How has he changed her life? How would her life in England or the New World be without him?

14. Does Sarah reunite with Richard at the end of the book, or is this a hallucination induced by her illness? Where has he been during the trip?

15. The ship and its passengers might be viewed as a microcosm of society. How does the placement of unmarried women and poor families in steerage, with wealthier passengers in cabins up above, compare with the social hierarchy at that time? with society now? At the dance for unmarried women, the Scottish women start a fight with the English women; Sarah eavesdrops on an Irish family in the berth near hers and remarks, "English girls would never be treated in the same manner as a poor Irish family" (p. 126). What influence do ethnic and national differences have on notions of class? In the new colony of Australia, where all the passengers will be foreigners, will these differences matter? Why?

16. Toward the end of the novel, we learn that Matron is haunted by her own ghosts. How does the tragedy in her past correspond with her behavior toward the unmarried women? Does she see the unmarried women as her children, or as versions of herself? Why is she so hard on them? How do you feel about the fact that she abandoned her two sons in Australia? What responsibility does she have to them? To the memory of her infant girl and husband? To the unmarried women? How does loss affect a person's behavior?

17. Several people in the novel are touched by madness: Sarah's grandmother, her mother, the Albatross Man, and Sarah herself, among others. What defines insanity? Is it an escape, a coping mechanism, a loss of control? How much is sanity or insanity brought on by circumstances, how much by personality? Can madness be inherited? What causes Sarah's illness at the end of the novel?

18. The passengers on the ship dream impatiently, and fearfully, of the New World. Were their expectations realistic? What would they have found there? What drove people?and still does?to start over in new and unknown places? How has the world changed today, with few wild frontiers left to explore?

19. Why does the author choose to set her story in this particular historical setting? How is she able to use the time period and the circumstances to emphasize certain themes? What are those themes? Could this story have been told in a modern context? To what other books might you compare **The Salt Letters**? To what other literary characters might you compare Sarah?

Author Bio

Christine Balint, born in Melbourne in 1975, teaches writing at the Victorian College of the Arts. Her work has appeared in Australian Short Stories.

Critical Praise

"**The Salt Letters** is a mesmerizing novel which brings to life a nearly-forgotten bit of history with an immediacy that is both harrowing and poetic."

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Publication Date: August 21, 2012

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company

ISBN-10: 0393321606

ISBN-13: 9780393321609