

Reading Group Guide:



Island Time BY GEORGIA CLARK

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This reading group guide for **ISLAND TIME** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Georgia Clark**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

Love is in the salty sea air in this smart and steamy ensemble romantic comedy set in a tropical paradise, from the author of the “sparkly and entertaining” (*Oprah Daily*) *It Had to Be You*. This is one deserted island you won’t want to be rescued from.

The Kellys are messy, loud, loving Australians. The Lees are sophisticated, aloof, buttoned-up Americans. They have nothing in common . . . except for the fact that their daughters are married. When a nearby volcano erupts during their short vacation to a remote tropical island off the coast of Queensland, the two families find themselves stranded together for six weeks.

With only two island employees making up the rest of their party, everyone is forced to question what—or who—they really want. *Island Time* is a sumptuous summer read that dives deep into queer romance, family secrets, ambition, parenthood, and a bird-chasing bromance. This sexy, sun-soaked paradise of white sandy beaches, crystal-clear waters, and lush rainforest will show you it’s never too late to change your

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Soon after the Kellys and the Lees arrive on Mun’dai for their tropical family vacation, chaos ensues as a nearby volcano erupts, and they find themselves stranded for 6 weeks. The author has stated that *Island Time* is a “pandemic novel”, a literary reflection of the way our lives changed course as a result of being in stuck in lockdown, and the way that forced us to grapple with big questions and make surprising decisions. Considering the book as whole, which character could you relate to most? What changes did you make as a result of the pandemic?
2. Mun’dai itself acts as a character in the novel, “an island unlike any other” (prologue). What makes Mun’dai distinctive? What is its draw for each of the characters? What about it appeals to you the most?
3. Reread the note from Liss to the guests (page 6), which quotes Butchulla law: “What is good for the land comes first; if you have plenty, you must share, and if it’s not yours, you shall not take.” Why do you think the author chose to include this? How does it set the stage for the story to come?
4. In addition to the beautiful descriptions of the sandy beaches, lush landscape and quirky animals, the book also addresses Australia’s history, Indigenous rights and culture, land ownership, and conservation efforts. With the author being Australian herself, why do you think it was important to her to include these details in the story? What did you find most interesting about what you learned?
5. Each chapter in the novel focuses on different characters and their unique dreams, goals, fears, and relationships. What overall effect did this have on your reading experience? How would the story have been different if it was all told from one character’s perspective, like Amelia or Matty?
6. Age, race, and sexuality are diversely represented through the characters in the novel. How does this rich diversity affect the plot and structure of the novel? What does the wide-range of experiences allow the author to express throughout the course of the novel?
7. Matty and Parker seem to have it all—great careers, a new apartment waiting for them in Sydney, and plans to have children—

- but then Matty voices her hesitations about all of these important topics. How does this impact their relationship and how are they able to move past these problematic differences? When is it too late to reverse big decisions made in a marriage?
8. Amelia follows her own emotional and romantic journey—from arriving to the island thinking about her future wedding to James, to experiencing the ultimate betrayal, to cultivating a relationship with Liss. Why do you think it was important for the author to include this storyline of coming out as bisexual to her family and finding love in the novel?
 9. Both Jules and Ludmila have drastically different opinions on parenthood and how to raise children, as evidenced from Matty’s interviews with them as part of her work on a new podcast (page 185). What does it mean to be a “good mother?” Is there more than one “right” way?
 10. Glen and Randall begin to bond after they think they may have seen a rare Boobook, thought to be extinct. How does their “birdwatching bromance” influence the arc of the story? Why do you think Glen didn’t tell anyone about the so-called extinct bird once he had proof of it?
 11. Throughout the majority of the novel, Glen and Jules are hiding their separation from their children. Glen wants to tell them, but Jules wants to wait until after the vacation. What do you think you would have done in this circumstance? Is it too late to reinvent yourself after 36 years of marriage?
 12. Jarrah is a wonderful character who offers readers a glimpse into Indigenous culture and the issues surrounding Australia’s past and present. In what ways did Jarrah’s character add depth to the novel? Would the novel have lacked authenticity without him?
 13. In the epilogue, Amelia muses about whether or not we have soulmates: “She doesn’t know if Liss is the one or her soulmate. She doesn’t know if those things exist. What Amelia does know is she wants it to work and she isn’t expecting perfection.” How has your philosophy around love changed as you’ve matured and gained experience? Which character’s take on love did you relate to the most?
 14. At the beginning of the book, the Kellys and the Lees couldn’t be more different—but by the end, they’ve bonded and have learned they are more similar than they could’ve ever imagined. What changed to make this possible? How can this sentiment be applied to the people in your own life? Have you ever gotten on the same page as someone very different from you—how?
 15. The author has publicly stated, “Can rom-coms save the world? I think so.” What does she mean by this? What themes of the book exemplify better ways to live our lives and in turn, positively influence others?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. *Island Time* joins the ranks of great romance novels by authors like Casey McQuiston, Elin Hilderbrand, and Christina Lauren. Choose a book by one of these books to read in your book club, and compare and contrast their depictions of dating, life, and love.
2. *Island Time* has all the elements of a classic romantic comedy. Poll your book club and see which rom-com film is the group’s favorite. Then, as you watch it together, mark down the similarities and differences between the movie and *Island Time*.
3. *Island Time* has an utterly charming cast of diverse and relatable characters. What actors would you cast for the screen version? Discuss with your book club whether it should be a film or TV series.
4. Visit @georgialouclark on Instagram and georgiac Clark.com for more information on *Island Time*. Consider inviting her to Skype with your book club.

A Conversation with Georgia Clark

Q: *Island Time* is your second rom-com. How did the writing process differ from how you approached writing *It Had to Be You*?

A: The writing process was similar—daydream to outline to multiple drafts—but the story’s origin was unique. This novel was the answer to big, existential questions about what I REALLY wanted to write about and put out into the world. The clearest and most pressing answer, forged in the brutal Spring of 2020 in New York City, was queer love stories.

After the world turned into a giant hospital, I lost my mind for a bit then started working on an autofic, which is autobiographical fiction *one breath away* from reality. I wrote about a character called “Georgie” who meets her future partner Marielou (my actual wife’s pseudonym on the dating profile we met on). I would describe this writing experience as excruciating. I put the pages aside and road-tripped to L.A., spending the whole summer bouncing around different friends’ homes who were similarly escaping their four walls. After lockdown in NYC, it was a wild, impulsive, uncharted time.

On the last night before flying home to NYC in August 2020, I *had a dream* I should write a completely different book from the autofic I was having so much trouble with. I couldn’t stop thinking about the dream and when I got back, wrote the outline for what became ISLAND TIME in a week. It was both an escape from the pandemic and a response to it, in all the characters having their life courses rechartered after going into a form of lockdown together. I finished the first draft in Feb 2021 and the second draft in May 2021. It was the quickest I’ve ever written a book.

Q: This is your first Atria book that doesn’t take place in New York City. Rather, it takes place in Australia, where you are from! Can you discuss why you wanted to set this particular book *Down Under*, on an almost-deserted island no less?

A: Short answer: the pandemic. Starting this book during lockdown in NYC, it didn’t feel right to set a sexy, fun book in the city. Instead, I wanted a story to take me to the place I couldn’t go and the people I couldn’t see. Australia closed its borders in March 2020. I was homesick and missed my family. I wanted to be in nature, on a beautiful island, surrounded by my home country’s quirky fauna and flora. When I write, I can really see/smell/hear/taste/touch my setting. Writing this book was like taking an extended vacation to Mun’dai. It was a true joy.

Q: *Island Time* is set on Mun’dai, a fictional island inspired by a real one, K’Gari (Fraser Island). Both the fictional and real island are Butchulla land, an Indigenous tribe of Australia. Throughout your charming, comedic novel, you also bring up important issues that have surrounded Indigenous tribes for thousands of years, like rights and land ownership. Why was it important to you to include this part of the island’s history and culture in the story?

A: Because you can’t write an Australian story about the land without it also be about the traditional owners of that land. Anything less would be unethical. It wasn’t even really a choice for me, it just had to be that way. While the island is obviously beautiful, it—like all beautiful things—is much more than just its looks. The land is spiritually significant for Indigenous people, and being able to write about that gave the book, and the setting, depth.

Q: This book is full of beautiful descriptions of Australian animals, the landscape, cuisine, and Indigenous culture, giving readers such a vivid picture of the island. As a native Aussie, did you rely solely on your personal experiences or did you do any additional research for the book?

A: I did a LOT of research! I believe specificity and authenticity make for a rich literary experience and it took a lot of background reading and interviewing to bring this fictional island and its inhabitants—most of whom had special knowledge or professional backgrounds foreign to me—to life.

For the island’s geography, I modeled it off the nearby K’Gari (Fraser Island) which is located in Hervey Bay, where I spent my summers as a kid visiting my grandparents, and where my mum lives. We’d visited K’Gari on my last trip home in 2019—it’s a special place for us, and unique, geographically, being a sand island that has several different landscapes—rainforest, bushland, freshwater lakes, mangroves. I used this as a base to create Mun’dai.

All the flora mentioned is found on K’Gari, so Mun’dai—if it was to exist—is geographically accurate, right down the leafless milkwort and Queensland Blue gum. A Guide to Common Plant Species of Fraser Island by Jacinta Padgett was helpful in developing the island’s landscapes, and by extension, Jules’ character. I read this sort of ecological writing looking for metaphors I could spin into sections like this: *The balmy air was honeyed with wattle. Despite having a delicate yellow puff for a flower, it was a surprisingly hardy plant. Coastal communities were harsh places for flora, being constantly exposed to the wind and the tide. Only species that adapted survived. Banksia trees, with their distinctive yellow flowers the size of a corncob, developed leathery leaves to reduce water loss. Ground covers like Knobby Clubrush produced needle-like stems to minimize surface area. Beach grass was salt- and wind-tolerant. Jules didn’t want to become harsh in order to survive. She wanted to stay soft. My own mother is also a horticulturist like Jules, and so I need to embody the same level of knowledge she had.*

Ditto for the fauna, with one exception—brumbies (wild horses) no longer live on K’Gari (but did for decades). The first draft didn’t have as many animals but my wife encouraged me to add more because “Americans love that sort of stuff!”. So I added in sugar gliders and dingoes (*wongari*) and dolphins and turtles and Max, the huntsman spider, who was added to give loner Liss someone to talk to in her solo scenes. I know nothing about birds, but Glen does! On top of reading a lot of dry, birding books, I read *The Genius of Birds* by Jennifer Ackerman, which helped me write sections like this: *Her father once said that the world humans experienced was radically constrained by their cognitive, biological, and cultural limitations. Birds, he explained, could smell the shape of an entire landscape. Hear sounds inaudible to human ears. See unimaginable explosions of color and pattern: literally, a bird’s-eye view of the world.* That’s all true! I got the idea for Lady Lushington Boobook after reading about the extinct Lord Howe Boobook (Lord Howe Island is similar in shape to Mun’dai). I loved how that storyline turned out, it’s one of my all-time faves.

The food is accurate too, what I’d imagine an island like Mun’dai would be able to grow and supply. I was obsessed with Cup-A-Soup as a kid, so I gave that quirk to Liss. I also did research into Parker’s job, fishing, the ballet, Glen’s psychology as an almost-single man of his generation, among other things.

But the most extensive research I did was on the Indigenous history and to help create the character of Jarrah. K’Gari and Hervey Bay are Butchulla land, so I figured Mun’dai, if it existed, would be the same. As mentioned in the book, K’Gari is under non-exclusive native title: because fiction (especially rom-com) has the power to reinvent the world, I granted Mun’dai exclusive native title, which means more power and rights for the tribe. I read books and articles on this topic, but I much prefer in-person interviews to gain this specific sort of personal-cultural knowledge. Of all the people who helped inspire and shape this novel, I am the most indebted to Luke Barrowcliffe. *Island Time* would not have been possible without this wonderful human. Luke is a Butchulla man, based in Gympie, who runs an Indigenous multimedia company called Goorie Vision. After generously replying to a cold email, we started a conversation that continued over many months. Luke shared his story with me—as an activist, community member, artist, father, and son. There was already a startling amount of parallels between Jarrah and Luke— Luke helped enrich and deepen them. From the cleansing ceremony to the creation myths, from the houses’ designs to the names of significant landmarks, Luke helped bring the Indigenous past and present of Mun’dai to glorious life. Learning from Luke and sharing his story was an emotionally, intellectually, and culturally enriching experience that I’ll never forget. I discovered “singing in the whales” via Cherissma Blackman-Costelloe who I was also able to interview, as well as Michelle Deshong, of the Kuku Yulanji nation, and Butchulla Elder and artist Karen Hall.

Q: The story follows two very different families, connected by their married daughters. What is supposed to be a relaxing (and short) tropical getaway turns into an extended staycation. Why did you choose these particular family dynamics? Were any of the characters inspired by your own family? The book is dedicated to your family, after all!

A: The Kelly family is a loving, *fictionalized* ode to my family, who I missed so much during the pandemic. My wonderful mother, Jayne, never leaves the house without her Bunnings hat, makes her own jam, and worked in bush regeneration. However her and Jules’ personalities are quite different—my mum loves her granddaughter but is not baby-hungry and not an extrovert like Jules, either. She is separated from my dear old dad, who basically is Glen—a shy and clever retired electrical engineer who loves jazz and tricky crossword puzzles. Not a bird watcher though!

My actual in-laws are very different to the Lees, who were invented more as direct foils to the Kellys: stylish, cool, independent Ludmila and fit, confident alpha male, Randall. Opposites work well in fiction—they’re all but essential in a successful buddy comedy, which is Glen and Randall’s storyline. And I wanted to tease out different versions of motherhood, which worked well with the two moms.

Q: Matty Kelly, and her wife, Parker, seem to have a planned trajectory for their lives. But when Matty has second thoughts about big issues like wanting a baby, her career, and where she wants to live, their carefully-laid plans—and their marriage—are tested. Why did you choose to highlight these particular issues between Matty and Parker?

A: Long story short, Matty is basically me.

In the development phase of this book, I was messing around with first person autofic, which is fiction very close to reality. As part of this process I was working through a book published by the School of Life called *Who Am I?*, a book of “*Psychological exercises to develop self-understand*”; essentially provocative, introspective questions. I spent the first few months of the pandemic writing thousands of words on topics such as childhood, personality, addiction, fantasy/obsession, sex, and more. While I

ultimately ended up back in ensemble, third-person, a lot of what came up for me in that very honest writing made its way into the book. For example, Matty's thoughts on ambitions are all taken from an essay I wrote on the subject, at that time.

The questions of future and fertility were also things my wife and I were asking ourselves, even though our story has ended, happily, with the arrival of our daughter.

Q: Amelia Kelly arrives on the island with her own problems—she finds out her boyfriend is married! In the midst of her heartbreak, she bonds with Liss, the very cute, blue-haired caretaker on the island. Sparks fly, and Amelia comes out to her family as bisexual. Why was bisexual representation important for you to include in the novel?

A: At its heart, I see this book as a romance. As a queer person myself, I love reading, watching, and hearing about queer love stories—I can see myself, and my romantic/sexual fantasies, in them. I wanted this novel to be super gay, but not to include any storylines of someone afraid to come out or facing any seriously negative consequences. There are plenty of those stories out there, and as someone who came out two decades ago, that's well in my past. Rather, I wanted the issues and conflicts to be about other things, so even as Amelia realizes she's going to have to come out to her family, that's not the biggest issue, or something readers have to spend a lot of time getting anxious about. I believe rom-coms should be pleasurable and we traditionally see a lot of anxiety wrapped up in queer love—anxiety about identity, about being caught kissing/in bed, or outed without consent. I have a personal rule never to have a queer couple getting caught—it's a bit of a cliché.

Q: At the beginning of the novel, the two sets of parents couldn't be more different (or so they thought). By the end, they've bonded and learned more about and from each other than they ever dreamed possible. What do you hope readers take away from the Kellys and the Lees?

A: I never have any agenda as far as what I want readers to take away from a story—art is so personal and everyone will react differently, especially with a story with so many characters and issues. Maybe they'll be inspired by Jules and Glen's respective new chapters or the way Matty and Parker have the grace and imagination to allow their path to change so drastically, both as a couple, and personally. Maybe they'll just be swooning over Amelia and Liss! I don't tend to start novels with themes in mind, but what emerges a lot in my writing is the concept of home (I'm an expat; it's on my mind a lot) and the difficulty/pleasure in allowing yourself to be seen and loved for who you are (something that has been revelatory for me in my marriage). I hope that queer readers enjoy all the queer storylines—sexy/romantic/emotional. I hope everyone enjoys Glen and Randall's bird-chasing bromance!

Q: You've created a beautifully diverse and authentic cast of characters in different stages of their lives who are navigating love, life, and loss in different ways. Who was your favorite character to write and why?

A: Impossible to answer! Liss is my idea of an ideal rom-com lead—I have a huge crush on her—so being inside her head was pretty fun, especially getting to know her backstory (I think Sad Sack Sundays is such a good cover night—someone should start it for real!). I really enjoyed Glen and Randal's bromance—that was the last storyline to come together, and then it ended up being one of my favorites. But as far as favorites go, Matty was easy and fun to write as she is sort of an unfiltered version of me at my most bratty/confident. Amelia is all heart, so it was fun to write a woman who was a little less self-sacrificing and, like me, very ambitious and, hopefully, funny.

Q: What are you working on next?

A: My next book is another queer ensemble rom-com, set up in the Catskills, over the holidays! It's very Christmassy and romantic and sexy and fun. I also have my monthly storytelling series, Generation Women, which invites a woman or non-binary performer in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s+ to tell an original story on a theme. And later this summer myself and fellow author Hannah Orenstein are launching Heartbeat, a Substack showcasing the best short love stories. Sign up at theheartbeat.substack.com.

COLOR YOUR WAY THROUGH MUN'DAI!



Vacay All Day

Fresh pineapple, cut into chunks
(approx. 4 cups)

Good splash of coconut juice
(1 cup)

Slug of Aussie rum
($\frac{1}{3}$ cup)

Lime juice, fresh
($\frac{1}{4}$ cup)

Lemon-myrtle oil or lemon juice
(few drops, optional)

Ice

Blend well.

Garnish with a pineapple wedge and maraschino cherry.

Drink over a sunset, with your crush.

