

# *ISLAND JUSTICE*

## *DISCUSSION GUIDE*

### **ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

The author biography, discussion questions and interview that follow are provided here to enhance your group's reading of Elizabeth Winthrop's *ISLAND JUSTICE*. We hope that they will give you new ways of thinking about and discussing a novel that has been widely praised for its evocation of place, richly drawn characters and suspenseful storytelling.

ELIZABETH WINTHROP lives and writes in New York City. In addition to *ISLAND JUSTICE*, she is the author of a novel entitled *IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE*. Her short story, "The Golden Darters", was selected for inclusion in the 1992 edition of The Best American Short Stories. She has written more than forty books for children of all ages including the best-selling middle grade novels, *THE CASTLE IN THE ATTIC* and *THE BATTLE FOR THE CASTLE*. Ms. Winthrop is the daughter of the late Stewart Alsop, the political journalist.

## **READING GROUP QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION**

**1)** In ISLAND JUSTICE, the author seems to be presenting us with two women in different stages in their lives. Compare the characters and the life circumstances of Anna Craven and Maggie Hammond. In what ways are they different and in what ways do they resemble each other?

**2)** What is the meaning of the title?

**3)** The story is related from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. How does this affect your conception of the characters and your understanding of their daily lives? If the author had chosen to tell this story from one person's point of view, how would that decision have changed the story?

**4)** Some people have called Sam Matera, the naturalist, the hero of this book. Do you agree? How does the author relate the natural ecosystem of a New England island to the problems of the human community? What is the meaning of the last sentence of the book?

**5)** In an interview, the author has said that in every one of her heroes, there is a villain and in every villain there is a hero. Do you find this to be true of her characters? Discuss this concept in connection with Lauren Root, Al Craven, Sam Matera and Dennis Lacey.

**6)** What message was Nan Phipps' trying to give to her goddaughter Maggie, when she willed her the large Victorian house? Does Maggie ever get the message?

**7)** Al Craven is proud of the fact that he never hits his wife, Anna. Why is this so important to him? Do you think Anna is an abused woman? How does Erin's parents' relationship affect her?

**8)** There are many secondary characters peopling this book — Chuck Montclair, Miss Yola, Lauren Root, the Tremayne boys, Dennis Lacey. What role does each of them serve? If the author decided to write another novel about one of these people, who would you advise her to choose and why?

**9)** Why do you think the author chose not to give this island a name or pinpoint its geographical location?

**10)** The islanders are proud of their insularity. We take care of our own, they are fond of saying. Do you think their form of justice is more or less effective than the legal systems available to those of us who live on the “mainland?” Why?

**11)** The author is writing about a place that is cut off from the mainland, but is also, in many ways, cut off from itself. What do you think the author is saying about community?

**12)** In any part of your life — work, home, church, your book group — do you live in an insular community like this one? How is it the same as the community in ISLAND JUSTICE? How is it different?

## **INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH WINTHROP**

### **You grew up in a writing family didn't you?**

Yes, my father was the journalist, Stewart Alsop. He wrote a syndicated column with my uncle Joseph Alsop for the Herald Tribune. In their prime in the 50's, they had a readership of 25 million. In the days before television. But the writing goes back farther than that. My great grandmother, Corinne Douglas Robinson was a poet. And her brother, my great great uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, wrote thirty eight books. Of course, he was also the president of the United States, but it's the writing I like to focus on.

### **What was it like growing up in Washington, D.C. as the daughter of a world famous journalist?**

Strange and exciting. My father's best friends all worked for the news media or for the CIA. Information creates power in Washington and my parents entertained the people they were trying to get information from. My father had gone to boarding school and college with ambassadors and spies and writers and government officials. They were his good friends. They were always playing this cat and mouse game.

### **How did that affect you as children?**

I have five brothers. The three oldest ones and I became a kind of loose knit gang of marauders. We spied on the adults. We dug a bomb shelter in the front yard, we ran a private telephone system through the sewers of Washington into the house of the CIA officer responsible for the Bay of Pigs, we took secret tape recordings of my father's dinner parties. The adults spied on each other. We spied on them. In some ways, I'll always be a spy. It's good training for a novelist.

### **Why did you choose to set your novel on an island?**

Setting is a crucial element in my writing. I like to believe that I am writing timeless stories, that they are not nailed down specifically to life in the 90's for example. An island setting felt like a time and place out of mind. I also knew that by setting my story on a small isolated place, my characters would be forced to cross and recross paths with each other which would help to form the web of my

narrative. In the end, the island itself became a character in the story, a kind of omniscient narrator. This happened to me in IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE where the house became one of the characters.

**Do you think the setting affected the outcome of the book?**

Human nature is not bounded by seasons, by time and tides or by geography. My characters behaved in the same ways, both honorable and vicious, that human beings on the mainland behave. But as I had suspected, because the island contained them, it held them more accountable. In that way, the setting affected the outcome of the book.

**So what in your life inspired you to write about life in a small community?**

Five years in New York State Supreme Court trying to get justice in a divorce case. I tried to write about that experience in a more direct way and found I was boring my reader (and finally myself) with details of motions and legal finaglings. So I looked at the bottom line. I think many Americans have lost faith in our legal system. Money talks. That sums it up. If you're poor, you'd better take matters into your own hands.

I thought an island was a perfect place to explore the idea of home and community and what that has come to mean in our society.

**You have said that writing novels requires a great deal of research. Can you give us some examples?**

In my children's novels, THE CASTLE IN THE ATTIC and THE BATTLE FOR THE CASTLE a boy travels back in time to England in the middle ages. My other adult novel, IN MY MOTHER'S HOUSE, spanned the years 1886 to 1971 and it took place in New York City and the tobacco growing fields in Connecticut. For those two books alone, I researched castle construction, medieval weapons, rats, the plague, healing herbs, high society in New York City at the turn of the century, the Spanish influenza outbreak, small newspaper ownership, the various methods of growing cigar wrapping tobacco, stretching canvases, the suffragism movement in Connecticut etc. etc. etc. The list was endless.

**And for ISLAND JUSTICE?**

My characters do interesting things. Their work impacts on their lives and inform their characters. Anna Craven trains pointing dogs, vizslas specifically, for a living. Maggie

Hammond is a furniture conservator for museums and private collectors. Sam is the naturalist on the island and a herpetologist with a particular love for the yellow spotted salamander. Al Craven is a construction worker. Dr. Lacey is a pediatric cardiologist and a fly fisherman. In order for my reader to be caught up in the “dream of the book”, I must be able to convince him or her that I know what I’m talking about. I don’t want a fly fisherman to hurl the book across the room because Dr. Lacey uses the wrong fly when he’s fishing for stripers and blues in the Atlantic Ocean in November. All this takes research which I admit I love. I learn it all for the book and forget it soon afterwards.

**Is it difficult to switch back and forth between writing for children and writing for adults?**

It’s a matter of voice. I hear a different voice in my head when I’m writing for adults and when I’m writing for children. And point of view. In a children’s book, you stay very tightly in the protagonist’s head. It keeps you from getting preachy and moralizing. The adult in me is screaming, oh my god, don’t do that, it’s dangerous. But you can’t write from that place when you’re writing for children. You have to let your characters make mistakes.

I’m glad that I can switch back and forth. When I’ve been working on a novel for two years, I like being able to write a picture book for young children that might be finished in a week. Picture books remind me of the importance of language and poetry. Short novels for children force me to focus on plot. All of these tools are of course, vital when I work on fiction for adults. It’s all writing. Librarians and booksellers need to slot the books into different age groups so they know where to shelve the books. I don’t.

**What are you working on now?**

I have just published a book for young children called AS THE CROW FLIES. It deals with the relationship between a young boy and his father after a divorce. Due out from Clarion next year is a picture book called PROMISES about a little girl dealing with her mother’s illness. I have three more children’s books under contract and in various stages of production and I am making notes for my next novel.

**Can you talk about the subject of that book?**

Not yet. If I talk about a book too much, I find there’s no good reason to write it because I’ve gone and talked it away.