



BOOK
CLUB
FAVORITES

THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMEN

A NOVEL

LISA SEE

This reading group guide for The Island of Sea Women includes discussion questions and ideas for enhancing your book club. We hope that this guide will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1. The story begins with Young-sook as an old woman, gathering algae on the beach. What secrets or clues about the past and the present are revealed in the scenes that take place in 2008? Why do we understand the beginning of the novel only after we have finished it?
2. When Young-sook and Mi-ja are fifteen, Young-sook's mother says to them: "You are like sisters, and I expect you to take care of each other today and every day as those tied by blood would do" (page 13). How are these words of warning? The friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja is just one of many examples of powerful female relationships in the novel. Discuss the ways in which female relationships are depicted and the important role they play on Jeju.
3. On page 17, Young-sook's mother recites a traditional haenyeo aphorism: Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back. But she also says that the sea is like a mother (page 22). Then, on page 71, Grandmother says, "The ocean is better than your natal mother. The sea is forever." How do these contradictory ideas play out in the novel? What do they say about the dangerous work of the haenyeo?
4. In many ways, the novel is about blame, guilt, and forgiveness. In the first full chapter, Yu-ri has her encounter with the octopus. What effect does this incident have on various characters moving forward: Mother, Young-sook, Mi-ja, Do-saeng, Gu-ja, Gu-sun, and Jun-bu? Young-sook is also involved in the tragic death of her mother. To what extent is she responsible for these sad events? Is her sense of guilt justified?
5. On page 314, Clara recites a proverb attributed to Buddha: *To understand everything is to forgive*. Considering the novel as a whole, do you think this is true? Young-sook's mother must forgive herself for Yu-ri's accident, Young-sook

must forgive herself for her mother's death, Gu-sun forgives Gu-ja for Wan-soon's death. On a societal level, the people of Jeju also needed to find ways to forgive each other. While not everyone on Jeju has found forgiveness, how and why do you think those communities, neighbors, and families have been able to forgive? Do you think *anything* can be forgiven eventually? Should it? Does Young-sook take too long to forgive given what she witnessed?

6. Mi-ja carries the burden of being the daughter of a Japanese collaborator. Is there an inevitability to her destiny just as there's an inevitability to Young-sook's destiny? Another way of considering this aspect of the story is, are we responsible for the sins of our fathers (or mothers)? Later in the novel, Young-sook will reflect on all the times Mi-ja showed she was the daughter of a collaborator. She also blames Yo-chan for being Mi-ja's son, as well as the grandson of a Japanese collaborator. Was Young-sook being fair, or had her eyes and heart been too clouded?
7. The haenyeo are respected for having a matrifocal culture—a society focused on women. They work hard, have many responsibilities and freedoms, and earn money for their households, but how much independence and power within their families and their cultures do they really have? Are there other examples from the story that illustrate the independence of women but also their subservience?
8. What is life like for men married to haenyeo? Compare Young-sook's father, Mi-ja's husband, and Young-sook's husband.
9. **On page 189**, there is mention of haenyeo from a different village rowing by Young-sook's collective to share gossip. How fast did information travel around the island and from the mainland? Was the five-day market a good source of gossip, or were there other places that were better? **On page 201**, Jun-bu mentions his concern about believing any source of news. Were there specific instances when information that was being dispersed was misleading or false? What affects how people hear and interpret the news?
10. Confucianism has traditionally played a lesser role on Jeju than elsewhere in Korea, while Shamanism is quite strong. What practical applications does Shamanism have for the haenyeo? Do the traditions and rituals help the

haenyeo conquer the fears and anxieties they have about their dangerous work? Does it bring comfort during illness, death, and other tragedies? Does Young-sook ever question her beliefs, and why?

11. **On page 39**, Young-sook's mother recites the aphorism: If you plant red beans, then you will harvest red beans. Jun-bu repeats the phrase on **page 199**. How do these two characters interpret this saying? How does it play out for various characters?
12. At first it would seem that the visit of the scientists to the island is a digression. What important consequences does the visit have for Young-sook and the other haenyeo?
13. The aphorism "Deep roots remain tangled underground" is used to describe Young-sook's and Mi-ja's friendship, and it becomes especially true when it's revealed that their children, Joon-lee and Yo-chan, are getting married. How else does this aphorism manifest itself on Jeju, especially in the context of the islanders' suffering and shared trauma? Do you think it's true that we cannot remove ourselves from the connections of our pasts?
14. **On page 120**, Young-sook's mother-in-law, Do-saeng, says "There's modern, and then there's tradition." How does daily life on Jeju change between 1938 and 2008? Discuss architecture, the arrival of the scientists and the studies they conduct, the introduction of wet suits and television, and other changes. How does Young-sook reconcile her traditional haenyeo way of life with the encroaching modern world? Do you think it's possible to modernize without sacrificing important traditional values?
15. The characters have lived through Japanese colonialism, the Sino-Japanese War, World War II, the Korean War, the 4.3 Incident, and the Vietnam War. How do these larger historic events affect the characters and island life?
16. Mi-ja's rubbings are critical to the novel. How do they illustrate the friendship between Mi-ja and Young-sook? How do they help Young-sook in her process of healing?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB



1. Consider reading Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, which follows a lifelong friendship between two women in 19th-century China. Compare this friendship to the friendship between Young-sook and Mi-ja.
2. Time yourselves to see how long you can hold your breath. Now think about holding your breath for two minutes.
3. In *The Island of Sea Women*, there's an expectation that a daughter should follow in her mother's footsteps. Did this surprise you? Discuss how common you think it is even today for daughters to follow in their mothers' footsteps—personally or professionally.
4. If you have access to one, visit your local Korean history or art museum.
5. Korean Tea Master Yoon-hee Kim has designed a Korean tea and snack package for book clubs to enjoy while discussing the book. To find out more about it, visit BanaTeaCompany.com/Pages/Book-Club-Tea-Tasting-Kit-Korean.html.
6. Make this Jeju-style abalone porridge, following the recipe at this link: KoreanBapsang.com/Jeonbokjuk-Abalone-Porridge/
7. Visit Lisa's website at LisaSee.com and "Step Inside the World of *The Island of Sea Women*" to see maps, photos, and videos, and to learn about the haenyeo and Lisa's research.

A CONVERSATION WITH LISA SEE



Your books are meticulously researched. How does your writing process work? Do you research first, then determine a plot? Or do you begin your research, knowing what you hope to find to support the story you've already created?

I start with three basic ideas: the relationship that I want to write about, the emotion I want to write about, and the historic backdrop. For *The Island of Sea Women*, those were friendship, forgiveness, and the diving women of Jeju Island. Then I start to do the research. I research in all kinds of ways. I live close to UCLA and spend a lot of time in the research library. I look on the internet to see what I can find. Sometimes I'm looking for something in particular; sometimes I stumble across something and think, *Oooh! I've got to use that!*

For this book, I researched the special language of Jeju, the clothes that are dyed in unripe persimmon juice, the influence of Shamanism on the island, and so much more. I ate everything that I wrote about. (Eating is one of the greatest joys of research.) I interviewed people about the 4.3 Incident. I also had a copy of the 755-page human rights report on the massacre, which gave me additional first-person accounts of those years. For example, I used the recollections of an ambulance driver, who overheard military officers debating what should be done to the people of Bukchon.

Most important, I interviewed haenyeo in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, many of whom were still diving. This was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. Some of the interviews were prearranged, while others were a matter of luck and happenstance. I talked to women as they entered or left the sea. I also spoke with many older women—retired haenyeo—who were sitting on the shore collecting and sorting algae. Those encounters inspired the opening scene and the present-day vignettes in the novel.

When I'm doing research, what I find falls into one of two categories: something that is tied to a specific date or something that can be moved to a time and place of my choosing. I can't move the date of the bombing of Hiroshima. I can't move the date of the 4.3 Incident. (The date is right in the name—April 3.) Other things are flexible. When I learned that one of the main ways divers die is when harvesting an abalone, I knew someone in the novel would have to die that way. Would that happen at the beginning, middle, or toward the end of the book? I think of these things like sign-posts. Each day when I sit down at my desk, I know I'll be writing *toward* a signpost, but I don't know exactly how I'll get there. That's when imagination comes in. To me, that part of writing feels like I'm tapping into the magic of the universe.

The haenyeo perform amazing physical feats with their cold- and deep-water swimming and diving. In the book, scientists recognize their unique abilities and study them. Was this study based on a real study?

Years ago, back when I first learned about the haenyeo but long before I'd decided to write about them, I found an article detailing a three-year study of the women divers, published in the late 1960s in *Scientific American*. Was the ability of these women to withstand cold water—greater than any other human group on earth—genetic or an adaptation? I found the study to be fascinating. Later, when I knew I'd be writing about the haenyeo, my research brought me to other scientific studies. I read academic articles on the haenyeo and headaches, their thyroid function, the way they breathe, how and why they get the bends, and the effects of weights on their hips. I'm not a scientist and some of that material was challenging for me to understand and digest, but I loved all of it. I loved it so much, in fact, that I wanted to include some of it in the novel, which is why Dr. Park and his team arrive in Hado.

I suppose that could have seemed gratuitous, but his appearance sets off ripples that propel the final third of the novel.

Speaking of Dr. Park, here's a little secret. There was a point when I thought that Young-sook and Dr. Park would have a relationship. I even wrote a sex scene for them. But the whole time I was writing it, in my head I was screaming, *No, no, no!* I still have that chapter somewhere on my computer. May it never again see the light of day.

You interviewed shamans to create the character Shaman Kim and to learn more about the belief system of the haenyeo. What were the modern-day shamans like? Did you take any spiritual lessons from them to apply to your own life?

It was a great honor to meet Suh Sun-sil, the top woman shaman on the island. It's her job to go to seaside villages and perform rites and rituals for the haenyeo. I interviewed her at her home. On the surface, she seemed like a regular person—a wife, mother, and working woman. That said, I was struck by her combination of spirituality and practicality. She spoke at length about “soul loss”—the idea that part of your soul can leave your body as a result of a terrible trauma or tragedy—and what she does to help bring it back. We all have moments of great sadness and pain in our lives. My mother-in-law passed away recently. She was married to my father-in-law for sixty-nine years. I see my father-in-law suffering from soul loss right now. He's physically present, but it feels like a vital part of him is missing. Not only were the things I learned about soul loss from Suh Sun-sil reflected in the novel but I am also able to use them today in my own life.

How closely do you identify with your characters when writing about them? When they suffer, do you suffer, too? Is it difficult to write your characters into disaster, hurt, and pain?

I look at this a little differently. I'm not trying to identify with my characters. I'm trying to *live inside them*. When they suffer, I suffer. I also know what's going to happen to them far in advance, so I start suffering long before they have a hint that they're about to undergo something horrible. It didn't happen with this book, but when I was writing *Shanghai Girls*, I knew what was coming for the character named Sam. I loved him so much and starting about two months out I tried everything I could think of to change what was going to happen to him. But here's the thing: sometimes characters have minds and destinies that are outside my control.

I'd like to add something here, if I may. This novel has more violence in it than any other I've written. It was extremely difficult for me to write about the 4.3 Incident. I wanted it to be accurate, of course. But I also was very much thinking about how something like this affects individual people. On Jeju, the estimates are that between 30,000 and 80,000 people were killed. Sometimes, when we

hear numbers like that, we lose track of the fact that there are real people in those statistics. There are mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, sweethearts, and children. Real life isn't like a television show or a movie, where someone is killed but the story ends up being about solving the crime. In real life, everyone is affected when a family member is ill, injured, or dies. It's very, very hard emotionally for me to write about these things, because I'm trying as best as I can to be there with my characters and experience their losses, pain, and emotions with them.

But let's turn your question around to the reader for a second. One of the wonderful—and sometimes challenging—things that can happen when we're reading is that we ask ourselves, "What would I do in that situation? Would I be brave or a coward? Would I be loyal or betray someone?" These types of questions are particularly important for us as Americans, because, for the most part, we've led fortunate lives. For example, the United States hasn't had a war on its soil since the Civil War, which ended in 1865. It's hard for most Americans to imagine what it would be like to live under colonial rule, experience war or genocide right in our own neighborhoods, or live through something like the 4.3 Incident. I hope that readers put themselves in the characters' shoes and ask themselves what they would do in that situation. Reading builds empathy and sympathy, which we could use more of these days.

The rubbings Mi-ja and Young-sook make together are important symbols of their friendship. How did you come up with the idea?

My grandmother loved to travel. When she'd come home from a trip, she'd show me the rubbings she'd made. I loved opening them, seeing the images, and then feeling like I was being transported to other places. Young-sook and Mi-ja are illiterate, so they can't write to each other. They're also living at a time when very few people had cameras. I kept wondering how they would commemorate a moment if they couldn't write or take a photo. One day my grandmother's rubbings popped into my head. I was so happy, because rubbings were perfect!

It's surprising that a book like *Heidi* could have an impact on haenyeo on the Island of Jeju, so many thousands of miles away from the book's setting in Switzerland. Why were copies sent to Korea? And why did Heidi's story resonate so much with the haenyeo?

The entire island seems to be obsessed with Switzerland, and I'm pretty sure it originally stemmed from *Heidi*. There are Swiss restaurants, Swiss-styled hotels, and a Swiss theme park. Every haenyeo I interviewed had either been to Switzerland or was saving up to go there. What I think happened is that when girls were finally allowed to attend public school, suddenly reading material was needed for them. My guess is that the island received a shipment of Heidi for all the new little girl readers, and then it took off and became an obsession like Harry Potter. One of the most fun evenings I had on Jeju was a dinner with a group of professional women—all of whom were the first in their families to go to elementary school and later to attend university. A big topic of discussion was who would each of us prefer to marry—the doctor or Peter?

As for why Heidi's story resonates with the haenyeo, I think it's because they can relate to her strength, resilience, and endurance. On the surface, the particulars of her circumstances may seem very different from those of the haenyeo, but the similarities run deep and true. She may look like an adorable, rosy-cheeked little girl on the book jacket, but she experiences a lot of hardship. She's an orphan. She's dumped at the remote home of a grumpy recluse. She only gets to eat bread and goat milk. She lives in a beautiful yet harsh landscape. Despite it all, she retains her good humor and kindness.

Forgiveness is one of the enduring themes of the book. What's lost by not forgiving? How does holding on to your anger help or hurt? Why did you feel this was an important idea to explore at this time?

I was thinking about forgiveness on two levels. First, there's the personal. When someone you love and trust betrays you, can you forgive that person? Should you forgive that person? What would it take to forgive him or her?

Then I thought about the larger picture. How do societies, cultures, and countries forgive? Jeju Island has some dark history attached to it: the Japanese colonial period, World War II, the division of Korea into north and south, and the Red Scare. On Jeju, all this culminated in the 4.3 Incident when friends turned against friends, families against families, and the police and army against the populace. After fifty years of enforced secrecy about the massacre, Jeju, as an island, has taken on the ideal of forgiveness. It's now recognized internationally—along with Rwanda and South Africa—as a place that has sought and embraced forgiveness. Through this work, Jeju has become known as the Island of Peace.

Forgiveness isn't easy. It requires one group of people to own what they did, accept what they did, and hopefully apologize for what they did. It also requires another group of people to forgive. We tend to think of forgiveness as an act of self-sacrifice. "I'll forgive you for the sake of my family," or "I'll forgive you for the sake of my country." But what history (and supporting research) has shown is that forgiveness is actually an act of self-preservation. When we forgive, we are finally able to let go of the terrible moment, terrible tragedy, or terrible act of violence, which ultimately frees us from being prisoners of the past.

Whether we are individuals or entire societies, we need to try to find ways to forgive. Literature gives us an opportunity to see what can work, and why it should work, for the betterment of us all.

Many of your books are about women characters, their familial relationships and/or friendships. How do you keep the ideas fresh when it comes to creating the tensions and bonds between these women?

There are millions of fresh ideas about women's relationships still to be told! Let's remember that women writers haven't been getting published for all that long. Yes, there are the women writers we all know about—the Brontë sisters, Emily Dickinson, George Sand, Virginia Woolf, and some others—but really, they were few and far between. This means that in the great body of the world's literature most female relationships—mothers and daughters, sisters, friends—have been written by men. I find it extremely exciting to read about women through the eyes of women, and, again, this is still a relatively recent phenomenon. And there's such range to that, right? Women who shop, tough women detectives, flawed women, brave women, poor women, rich women, women from other cultures, religions, and traditions. As a writer, I'm drawn to women's friendship because it's unlike any other relationship we have in our lives. I'm especially interested in the dark shadow side of female friendship. We will tell a friend something we won't tell our mothers, our husbands or boyfriends, or our children. This is a particular kind of intimacy, and it can leave us open to the deepest betrayals and other failures in courage.

The women of Jeju have gone through so much, as women do in any place impacted by bad politics and war. What do you think gives them the ability to go on? What can we learn from them?

First, the haenyeo have *physical* courage and persistence. Second, since the older generation of divers lived through such difficult times, I'd highlight their *psychological* courage and persistence, too. Third, these women work together and share their lives together. They are literally facing life and death together every day. Somehow they are able to do this while maintaining good—and wry—senses of humor.

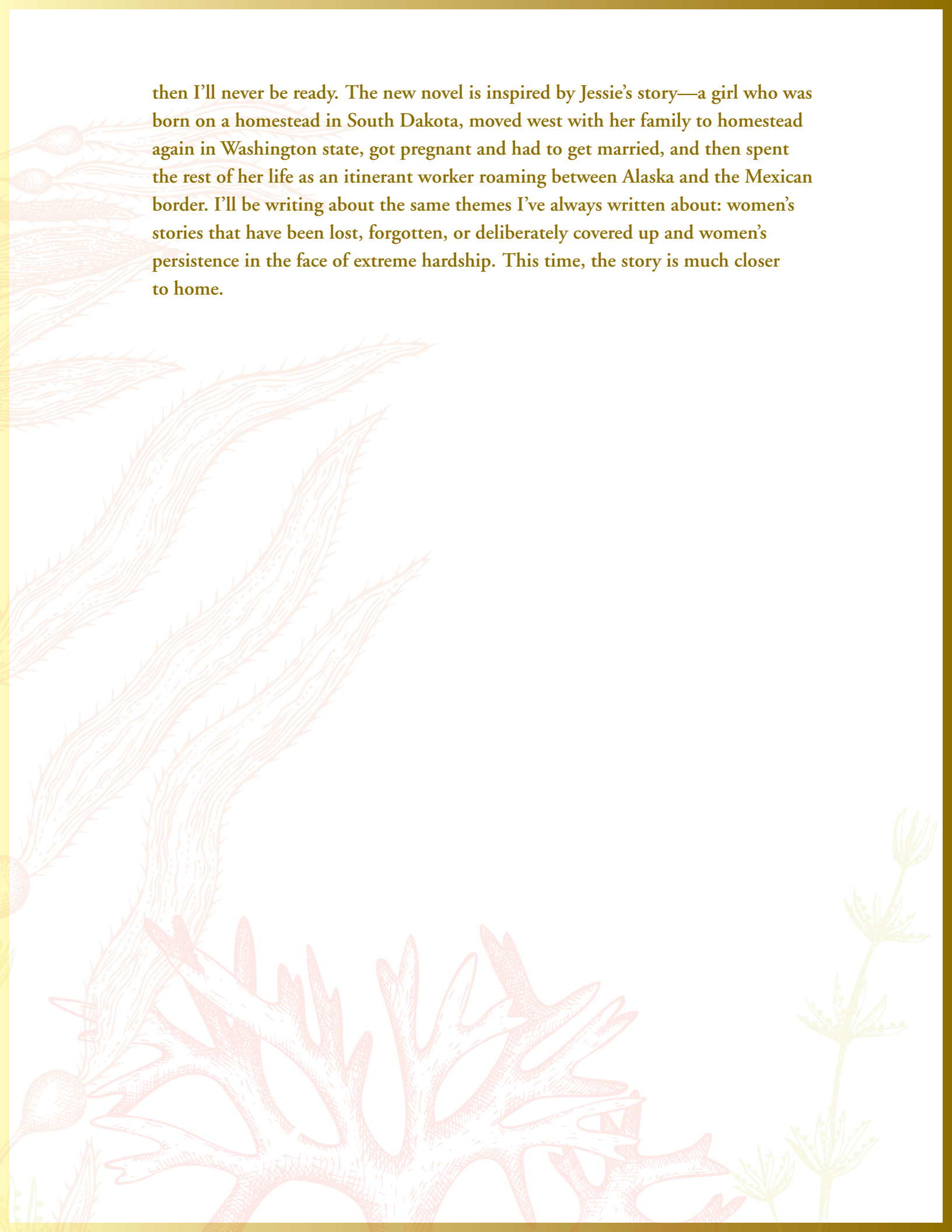
How does all that circle back to us and what can we learn from them? Bravery comes in many forms. For some of us, that means diving in freezing water to gather seafood to earn money to support our families. For others of us, that means going to an office job, or cleaning someone's house, or working in the fields—all to earn money to make our own ways in the world or to support our families. No matter where we live, we all long for love. No matter what our backgrounds, we all wish for our children to be happy, healthy, and successful. While the haenyeo historically have had more hardships than most of us, we all go through tough periods in our lives. Sometimes we rise to the occasion and sometimes we fail. What I think we can learn from the haenyeo is that no matter what tragedies or struggles we face, we must continue on for ourselves, for our families, and for the larger society that we're a part of.

Do you have a favorite haenyeo aphorism, and why?

I have two. The first is *Every woman who enters the sea carries a coffin on her back*. The other is *The sea is better than your mother. The sea is forever*. These two aphorisms contain the complexity of a diver's relationship to the sea. The first one shows the dangers that the women face every day. There are so many ways to die under the sea, after all. The second one shows the love and respect the women have for the sea. Many of the divers told me that when they are underwater they feel like they are in the womb of the world.

What's your next project?

When my grandmother died twenty-six years ago, I found in her things a diary written by *her* mother, my great-grandmother. For all these years I knew I wanted to write about Jessie, but I didn't feel like I was old enough or knew enough about life. Well, if I'm not old enough now and haven't learned enough about life yet,



then I'll never be ready. The new novel is inspired by Jessie's story—a girl who was born on a homestead in South Dakota, moved west with her family to homestead again in Washington state, got pregnant and had to get married, and then spent the rest of her life as an itinerant worker roaming between Alaska and the Mexican border. I'll be writing about the same themes I've always written about: women's stories that have been lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up and women's persistence in the face of extreme hardship. This time, the story is much closer to home.