

*Vintage*

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**BOOK CLUB KIT**

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A CONVERSATION WITH  
**MAGGIE SHIPSTEAD,**  
— author of —  
**GREAT CIRCLE**



**Who came first: Hadley Baxter or Marian Graves?**

Marian Graves came first, but Hadley Baxter wasn't far behind. I had started writing *Great Circle* from what is still the beginning, on Marian's timeline, but I didn't feel fully committed to the project until I had the idea for Hadley. Because I don't outline or plan plot out in advance for my books, I need a few elements to come together before I hit critical momentum and feel like I know what I'm doing. This might be as simple as a character and one central event (that's what I started with for *Seating Arrangements*), or it might be struc-

ture and character (structure was what kickstarted me with *Astonish Me*). In this case, it was Marian's character, Hadley's voice, and also the question I'd been batting around about the meaning of disappearance.

**Despite living in two different centuries, Hadley and Marian's lives converge and intersect in surprising, beautiful ways, including their yearning for freedom. In what ways do you think Hadley and Marian both feel restricted by their moment in time?**

Definitely both feel pressures inherent to being women and specific to their eras. It's Marian's both good and bad fortune to have an extremely unsupervised, unrestricted childhood, and so she doesn't quite understand the social limitations placed on her gender until she's deep in her adolescence and starts coming up against some real-world obstacles that take her a bit by surprise. Living outside gender norms in the 1920s–1940s took a huge amount of energy and determination; for her to lead the life she wants turns out to be exhausting and involves major sacrifices and consequences. Because she's so determined to be a pilot, in some ways she's blinded to the full weight of the trade-offs she's making in pursuit of that dream, and she doesn't see how she might find her-

self trapped by her own choices until it's too late. Then, down the road, when she's older, her wariness of losing her freedom profoundly shapes her, too. Her life becomes a kind of fortress that she feels like she has to constantly defend from invasion. As for Hadley, a movie star in the 2010s, one of the major forces working on her is an expectation that unless she keeps becoming a bigger and bigger star, she's failing. Nothing's ever enough.

She finds herself behaving in erratic, self-destructive ways that are semi-subconscious attempts to escape from the impossible hamster wheel she's running full speed on. She's looking for an alternative way of being, but she can't imagine what that is. And it almost goes without saying that, as someone who's famous and female, she lives with an absolutely savage and oppressive baseline public scrutiny of her body and behavior that's much more overbearing than what her male professional counterparts endure.

**As Hadley learns more about Marian's life to prepare for her role in *Peregrine*, what aspects of Marian's life and legacy do you think Hadley feels most drawn to?**

I think Hadley is particularly intrigued by the qualities she sees as being present in Marian and missing

in herself. She sees Marian as someone who not only knew exactly what she wanted to do—to fly around the world over the poles—but who was possessed by this desire and was willing to take huge risks in pursuit of it. The role of Marian comes to Hadley at a moment when she's adrift and confused, and she craves the kind of certainty and direction that she perceives in Marian. She wishes she wanted to do something (anything!) the way Marian had wanted to fly, and she has an amorphous sort of hope that she'll be able to find her way through her own life by inhabiting Marian's. Of course, the reality of Marian's life was more complicated, but Hadley, as we all do when we look at figures from the past, is seeing through the lens of her own experience and her own moment.

**GREAT CIRCLE spans whole continents as you chart Marian's dream of circumnavigating the globe. How much of your own travels informed the scale and scope of the novel?**

I'm not sure I would have felt comfortable writing this book in the same way, especially the sections about Marian's round-the-world flight, if I hadn't been to most of the locations, particularly the polar ones, which are so alien to most of us that you can't say, well, I've been to X similar place so I think I have the idea.

There really aren't similar places. It's absolutely possible to use settings in fiction when you haven't actually been there, but because this book is so explicitly *about* the places and about someone wanting to see these places, the specifics took on more weight than if the places were serving more as simple backdrops. I was absolutely determined to get to Antarctica, and I truly believe I wouldn't have been able to imagine it without having seen it. But also, when you go to Antarctica by ship, as almost all tourists do, you don't see the interior, this endless uninterrupted sheet of ice, which was important to the story. So that became something else I wanted to experience firsthand, and I managed to get a magazine assignment that involved landing in a plane on Greenland's ice sheet. When you try to imagine standing in a perfect flat disk of white that reaches all the way to the horizon, you can possibly imagine the visual, but you can't imagine the scale and the strange feeling of precariousness. During the years I was writing the book, I chased after ways of getting where I wanted to go (often by writing travel features), but then I also found that places I happened to go incidentally made their way into the book and enriched and expanded it. I'm not sure I would have used Alaska as a setting if I hadn't gone there twice during the time I was writing, once with a boyfriend and once on assignment.

As I traveled, I felt like I was a raccoon out gathering shiny treasures and bringing them back to add to my hoard. I like to travel for its own sake, but I also valued my trips because my life felt more integrated with the work of writing the novel than if I'd just been sitting in a room toiling away, although there was plenty of that.

**So much of this book is about searching for closure, trying to complete the circle, so to speak. To what extent do you think Hadley and Marian achieve this in their own lives?**

I've never felt confident about how possible closure is or what it really means in practice. I suspect that closure is much more of a process and a function of time passing than a decisive moment. Maybe closure is something that shifts your thinking about an event or a relationship and alleviates some of the surrounding emotional intensity or struggle, and that change lets you move forward? I think both Hadley and Marian succeed in changing and moving forward to some degree, in that they're both able to change the trajectories of their lives. As Marian points out, though, the end and beginning of the circle are the same point, so it seems possible that the sense of completion she thinks she's chasing can only be



found by veering away from the path.

**What real women in history do you think Marian would walk alongside? Were there any in particular that informed her character as you were writing?**

I read about a lot of different female pilots while I was writing, most of whom are forgotten and none of whom are as famous as Amelia Earhart, who is the person everyone thinks of when I describe the book. Certainly Amelia Earhart was one of my portals into the story because I was interested in this idea of disappearance and how it's often the same thing as death but, from the outside, has different emotional content. By far the most likely end of Amelia Earhart's story is that she ran out of fuel, crashed into the ocean, and drowned. But people have a really hard time accepting that and have spent most of a century concocting alternative stories. Why? That question is very interesting to me. But Amelia's character and personality have little in common with Marian's. There's no real life woman I modeled her after, but I absolutely drew inspiration from the bravery and determination of early female pilots—Beryl Markham, Elinor Smith, Jean Batten, Amy Johnson, Bessie Coleman, Jackie Cochran, just to name a few—and from women who, like Marian,

transported military planes during World War II. I went to the Hoover Institution's archives at Stanford and spent a few days reading the letters and papers of a few of the American women who flew in the Air Transport Auxiliary in the UK, and that was enormously helpful.

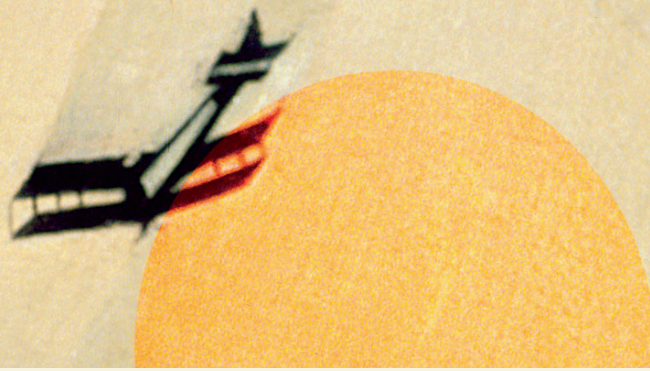
**What do you hope readers take away from this book? What feeling do you hope they're left with?**

I hope readers take away a renewed curiosity about the physical world. I think you can bring a commitment to exploration into your everyday life just by choosing to be observant and to be open to simple wonders, like just the wild birds and animals that live around us, even in cities, or, I don't know, the weather or what you see from the window of an airplane. It's all pretty amazing, really. A friend asked me what the book is about in one word, and I said, without hesitation, "scale." It's not the sexiest description, but when you think about the scale of the planet, the scale of a life—these things are both tiny and enormous, and I feel a sense of awe about that. I think I hope readers come to feel that way, too.

**What single word would you use to describe the feeling of flight?**

Potential.





# *Reading Group* \_\_\_\_\_

## **DISCUSSION GUIDE**

1. Why do you think Marian wants to fly around the world? Have you ever wanted to take a major risk without quite knowing why?
2. What do you think Hadley wants from playing the role of Marian? Do you think her expectations are met?
3. How is Marian's life shaped by her experiences of love? Do you think she really wants to love someone? What about Hadley?
4. What do you think is Marian's idea of freedom? What is yours?
5. How does Marian's relationship with her brother, Jamie, evolve over time? How would you react if you had a sibling like Marian?
6. Do you think Peregrine is going to be a good movie?
7. How do you think Marian was shaped by her unusual childhood? Do you think she was bruised or strengthened by the fact that she never knew her parents?
8. Hadley says that no story can ever be whole. What do you think she means?
9. Which friend or relative would you pass this book on to and why?



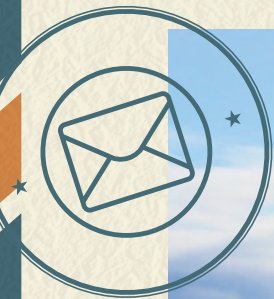
*“I thought I would believe I'd seen  
the world, but there is too much of  
the world and too little of life...”*



**LOS ANGELES**



**ANTARCTICA**







# MONTANA



# NEW ZEALAND

*I thought I would believe I'd completed something, but now I doubt anything can be completed."*

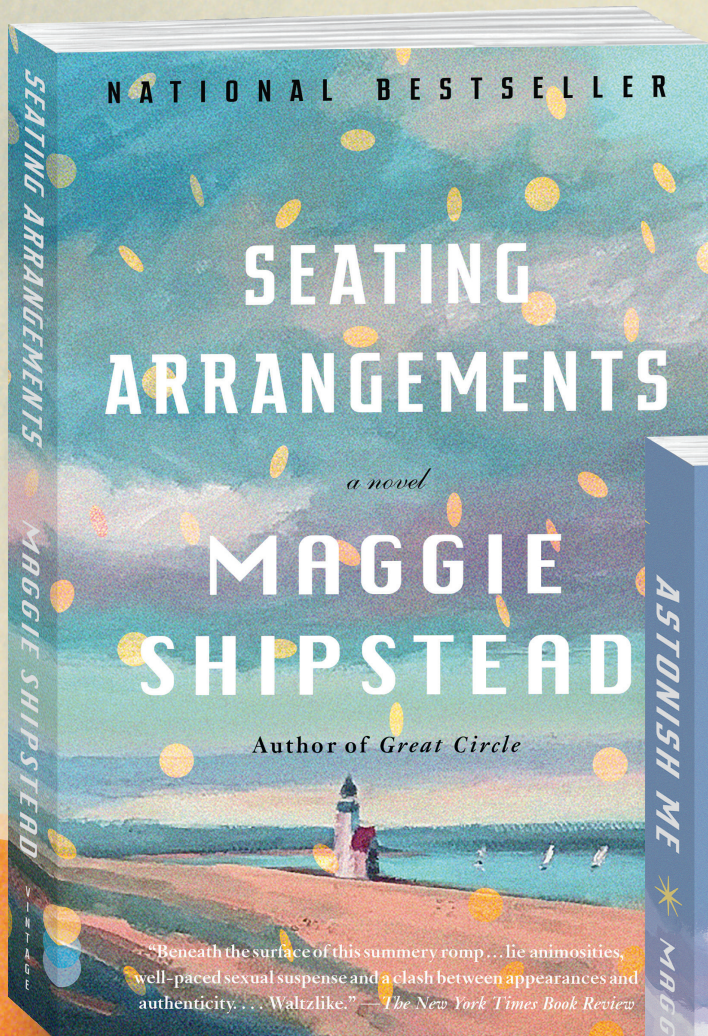
**—GREAT  
CIRCLE**



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— also by —

MAGGIE  
SHIPSTEAD

