

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Driftwood Summer

PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY

This Conversation Guide is intended to enrich the individual reading experience, as well as encourage us to explore these topics together—because books, and life, are meant for sharing.



A CONVERSATION
WITH PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY

Q. What inspired this story?

A. During the past five years, I've traveled extensively for book tours, literary festivals and speaking events. I've listened to people's stories, and I've noticed recurring themes in some of the situations that touch our lives—our complicated relationships with family, the pain of lost love, the challenge of breaking free from the past and the sadness we feel at the disappearance of beloved community gathering places. Bookstores, libraries and book festivals seem to be places where, through the vehicle of books and book clubs, people talk more openly about their lives. I wanted to tell a story that integrated some of the concerns that matter most to us.

The sisters in this story relate to one another through the veil of past hurts, old loves and ingrained patterns of communication. Throwing three slightly estranged sisters into a situation in which they absolutely must work together allowed me to create a story of family and community healing.

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Q. The beach and a bookstore—two of my favorite things. Are they among your favorites, too? Are any of the customers we meet in the bookstore based on real people?

A. I love beaches and bookstores, and figured my readers would, too! In my novels, none of the characters is based on real people, yet many are composites of people I've known. Some of the customers in the novel are also inspired by readers I've met over the years.

I set the novel in a bookstore because I am intrigued by the powerful influence of bookstores and libraries in my own life. Once inside a good bookstore, I lose track of time. Bookstores are more than places to buy merchandise. They are “gathering places” in many senses—where people gather, where I gather my thoughts. The endless stories in the books leave me with a full feeling, as if life will never be long enough to take in all the beauty of the written word. I am also fascinated with the role of books since they seem to be the perfect medium through which we share our hurts and pleasures, loves and lives.

Q. You're one of three sisters. Are you as different from your sisters as Riley is from Maisy and Adalee? What divides you and your sisters? What binds you together?

A. I didn't base the Sheffield girls on me and my sisters. Like most siblings, we're very much alike in some ways and profoundly different in others. I'm the oldest, which might make

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you think I'm the organized, type-A one in the family, but I'm not at all. My sisters, Barbi and Jeannie, are much more rational and organized, taking after our mother. I believe they tolerate my eccentric ways out of love. All that divides us right now is geographical distance and the all-encompassing needs of raising families with young children. What binds us together is shared history and love. . . . Our family is a very open and boisterous constellation. The past doesn't seem to have a hold on our relationships since we don't allow hurts to fester. As far as I know, none of us has ever loved the same boy. We talk through situations with a little sarcasm and a lot of honesty, hopefully keeping the past from influencing the present.

Q. This novel speaks to the importance of books in our lives. What role have they played in your life?

A. As a child I was a bookworm. I actually remember getting in trouble for ignoring the family because I was reading too much. My parents and sisters often teased me about always having my “nose in a book.” We often cannot explain why we love someone or something or someplace; and I can't explain why I love to read. I just do. Always have. Of course I do believe it has something to do with the power of story.

When I was twelve years old, my family moved from our hometown up north to south Florida—and this is where my real love affair with novels began. For many years I didn't have

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many good friends. Books were some of my best friends. They still are.

Q. Memories of childhood summers spent at the beach are especially meaningful to Riley and Mack. Have you ever spent a whole summer at the beach? What was that experience like for you?

A. Growing up as a preacher's daughter, I was blessed each summer when Dad took a "reading month" in preparation for the busy fall church calendar. We escaped to Cape Cod, where we spent the entire summer running over dunes, through cranberry bogs and in and out of thick woods. These are my fondest memories of my childhood. I believe those were the days where my imagination grew, where my love of reading and nature was stitched into my soul.

There was more freedom in those summer days than during the school year. My sisters and I built forts, sailed our tiny Sunfish around the lake and only came back inside to eat. Once a week we went to the library—my favorite day. I would check out as many books as we were allowed to and read them all before we returned the next week. Those library days are a large part of why I write today; my love of books and story began there, in the long, languid days of childhood summers.

Q. In the novel, Driftwood Cottage Bookstore acts as a community gathering place. More than just a place to hang out and buy books, it serves to bring people together and foster meaningful relation-

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ships. As you've visited bookstores to promote your work, what role have you seen real-life bookstores play in people's lives?

A. I've visited some of the most nurturing bookstores in the Southeast—places where people gather to talk about books and writing, to meet a friend for coffee, to buy a gift, or to chat with an author whose work they admire. They are places where a certain magic occurs. As people begin to talk about a story or the writing process, they also begin to talk about themselves. They connect. Acquaintances become friends, sometimes close friends. I love watching that process and being part of it.

It breaks my heart when I hear about another bookstore closing due to the financial challenges they face today. Libraries are also facing budget cuts and are hurting for funding. It is so important that, as readers and writers, we support our local bookstores and libraries. Sometimes we just don't know how much we value something until it's gone!

Q. Kitsy Sheffield seems to be a Southern woman of a certain generation, who places great importance on appearance, etiquette and gracious living. None of her daughters is quite following in that tradition. Does that reflect real changes between generations of women in the South today?

A. I think (or hope) that we, as women, are beginning to care less and less about what people think and care more and more about what we think, about our contribution to the world and

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to others. It's a challenge in any woman's life—balancing her own beliefs, needs and passions with the needs of her family. I wanted to touch on this subject while showing the sisters beginning to awaken to their own self-fulfillment.

Q. In several of your novels, including this one, you've explored the idea that each of our lives forms a story. Would you care to comment on this idea of life as story?

A. Ever since I was a young child, I've looked at my life and thought, "I wonder what will happen next." In this way, I've always looked at life through the lens of story. I don't believe anything happens by coincidence, and I often wonder what a chance encounter or new experience will mean in the long run of any life. If I pay attention, I often see threads in my life that intertwine, separate and come together again.

I also believe that our own experiences are better understood by hearing others' stories or in reading a story that touches our heart. Telling stories is the way we come to know and love one another. If we can look at the larger tapestry of life, instead of just the single threads of individual events, we begin to see how our lives intersect and connect. We notice meaningful patterns that weren't originally apparent. When life is viewed as an interesting story, it becomes an adventure. As the saying goes, truth is stranger than fiction.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree with Riley that book clubs foster compassion for others and a sense of community? What do you get out of your book club?
2. Patti Callahan Henry mentions some of her favorite novels in *Driftwood Summer*. What are some of your favorites?
3. The two older sisters—Riley and Maisy—suffer from an estrangement in their relationship that began when they both fell in love with the same boy. Have you ever had a relationship—with a sister, a brother or a best friend—that fell apart over a love interest?
4. Kitsy Sheffield, the girls' mother, asks Riley not to tell the other sisters about her illness until the party is over. Why do you think she wants to keep it secret? If you were Riley, could you have kept this information from your sisters?

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5. At the end of the novel, Maisy says, “I always thought there was this life; you know, this other life. . . . It was a life I thought existed in a parallel plane, and I couldn’t get to it.” What do you think she means? Have you ever felt that way?

6. Many people in the novel talk about Riley’s carefree confidence and tomboy ways as a girl, and how she has changed since high school. Why do you think she has changed so dramatically? Do you think she’ll ever rediscover the less restrained Riley again? Is it inevitable that we bury certain parts of ourselves as we become adults?

7. Mama’s cancer changes the way Riley looks at their relationship. Has impending death ever changed the way you looked at a particular relationship? At life in general?

8. To both older sisters, Mack Logan represents a youthful time in their lives. Do you have someone who represents such a time in your life? Do you feel you’ve idealized him or her? Do you keep in touch?

9. Maisy and Adalee both suggest that Riley lives vicariously through fiction rather than engaging fully in reality. Do you think the accusation is fair? Could you be accused of the same thing?

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10. Describe what you think happens to each of the main characters during the year after *Driftwood Summer* ends. What happens to the bookstore?

11. Share some of your memories of spending summers at the beach.

12. Of the three sisters, which do you like best? Least? Why?