

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Between
THE TIDES

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. Between the Tides is your fourth published novel, but you've been working on some version of it since you first set fingers to the computer keys. Can you tell us a little about the inspiration for this novel and how it has evolved over the years?

A. When I first set my mind and heart on writing a full-length novel, I wrote a manuscript that I called *Between the Tides*, but it was quite different from the book you are now holding. The original story took place during an entire summer in Seaboro, and Catherine was a married woman trying to decide whether to divorce her husband while she dealt with a daughter who was repeating some troubling patterns in Catherine's own life. Now, of course, Catherine is single and childless, and she spends only three days in Seaboro. It took me years to find the best way to convey my ideas, to figure out what shape my story should take.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

During all my efforts, the ideas that originally inspired the novel remained unchanged—how someone can get stuck between a tragedy in the past and the uncertain future, and live a life of safe complacency without loving deeply or living fully. Since the beginning, this novel has been about how secrets affect lives, and about how tragedy reshapes personalities. Finally, this novel is about the redemptive power of unconditional love.

Because *Between the Tides* was my first novel, I ended up rewriting it many times. I've called it the novel that taught me how to write, and the novel that would never see the light of day. Now I also call it the novel that showed me the value of persistence. Four years after originally starting the manuscript, I pulled it out of storage and saw with new eyes the beauty that still lay hidden within its characters and themes. It has evolved in structure, voice, and plot through the years, but the heart and the title have remained unchanged.

The title works for me as a metaphor for living (even thriving) between the high and low times in life. For me, the shifting tide provides a perfect image of the ebb and flow of life.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Q. Catherine's journey is prompted in part by three questions that are posed at the beginning of the novel and recur throughout it until the very end. What inspired these questions?

A. Last summer, when I was halfway through completely rewriting this story, I was on a book tour in Florida for *When Light Breaks*. I went out to lunch with a few friends and they brought a friend, a nonfiction writer and a psychologist. She told us about these three questions. She believes that people's answers tell everything you need to know about them. My friend and I talked about these questions for the next two days, until I finally realized that I had received a key to the plot of the novel. I already had in place the tragedy in the past, and now I had three questions to represent the future, which Catherine has long refused to think about.

Q. You have three children. Was it hard to write about losing a child?

A. Yes, it was gut-wrenching to write about a lost child, but this heartbreaking emotion gave me great empathy for all the wounded characters in the novel. Each person is affected differently by Sam's death. Their behavior afterward is influenced not only by the pain they endure,

CONVERSATION GUIDE

but also by the secrets they carry. I wanted to look at the before and after of such a tragic event, add the burden of a great secret, and examine how both might influence the rest of the characters' lives.

Q. Grayson Leary's favorite novel is The End of the Affair. What's yours?

A. I'm not sure I could possibly name any one novel my favorite. Besides, my choice would change with the seasons of life. But, if forced, I'd narrow my choices down to: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis and *Beach Music* by Pat Conroy. Can I add *Gone With the Wind*? Now, how is that for eclectic?

I do believe novels influence our lives. I frequently give a speech on the power of story, and my premise is this: There is a human need for story; story is the language of the heart and of faith; powerful stories carry truth; stories can act as a mirror; and stories open our minds to new ideas. And, of course, novels filled many a lonely moment in my childhood. When asked why I write, I always say it is because I truly do believe in the power of story, not to mention that I feel a need to tell the stories running around in my head.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Q. Do you have a bulletin board with quotes all over it, like Grayson does?

A. In fiction, writers sometimes give our characters traits and quirks we wish were our own. I often find inspiration in quotes and wish I collected and organized them into categories. Right now, my bulletin board is covered with pictures of my kids, book ideas, and random notes to self. Maybe I'll start a new board. . . .

*Q. At the core of *Between the Tides* lies a secret that the adults keep from Catherine, which profoundly shapes her life. Do you think it was a mistake for them not to tell her the truth, or was it something she had to discover on her own?*

A. As the author, I am observing more than passing judgment. Whether and when Grayson should have told Catherine about Sam is not a question I ever asked myself. What I did ask was how such a secret might affect Catherine's life. I believe Grayson kept the truth from Catherine to protect her, yet it continued to influence her life in a profound way. I wanted to show that even an untold truth affects choices and patterns of living.

The way Catherine coped with her sense of loss and guilt was to push forward in life without ever talking

CONVERSATION GUIDE

about or thinking about Sam; to take control by keeping herself sequestered, safe and only halfway loving and living. She even gave up one of her favorite childhood activities—reading—to keep the past from impacting her life now. Her way of living is as much about the past as it is about fear, but it takes a trip to the place where she grew up, the full truth, and someone who truly loves her for her to understand that.

Then, of course, there is each character's life choices after Sam's death—Ellie living in love, even with a broken heart; Jim choosing death; Boyd allowing anger to consume him; and Grayson continuing to live and love the family he had next to him (although he did withhold the truth from his daughter). I feel great empathy for each person in this novel, as each is dramatically changed in a single instant.

Q. Margaret Leary and Ellie Loughlin take very different approaches to child rearing and life. What influenced your choices in these women, and were they based on anyone you know?

A. A magical moment in writing occurs when a theme emerges that the novelist doesn't see until she finishes the book. I had rewritten this book multiple times, and yet

CONVERSATION GUIDE

it was not until I completed this last version that I saw the echoes of the biblical Mary and Martha in Ellie's and Margaret's characters.

A story in the Gospel of Luke tells of two sisters, Mary and Martha, who are preparing to welcome Jesus into their home. Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens. Martha, the ultimate homemaker, decides she must make the perfect feast; she is too busy to sit and talk, too distracted to appreciate the people in her home. Jesus says Mary has "chosen the better part."

Most women are a little of both Mary and Martha, sometimes able to enjoy life, and at other times so busy they can't take life in. As twelve-year-old Catherine observes, Ellie and Margaret are opposites in their approach to life, yet she needs both of them. So Ellie and Margaret are not based on any specific people I know, but on the ideas set forth in the story of Mary and Martha.

Q. This is your fourth novel set in the Lowcountry. Will your next novel also be set there?

A. When I begin to write something new, I have in mind a theme, a situation, and a character (or two), and they dictate the setting. All four of my previous novels have required that part of the story be set in the Lowcountry.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

What I'm working on now is set in Atlanta, the perfect place for the characters and situations that are beginning to take shape for me.

Q. You continue to travel throughout the South to promote your books. Can you share some of the best and worst experiences you've had on the road?

A. Oh, the glamour of a book tour! I have come to one conclusion—the guy in the back row who asks the most questions about getting published is the guy least likely to buy a book. Okay, so it's not as glamorous as the media might lead you to believe, but there are wonderful surprises every day. I am constantly in awe of the booksellers who devote their time to talking about books, selling them, and hosting events. I am grateful to the readers who take the time and energy to come out to see me. The best part about being on the road—I get to meet fantastic people; hear new ideas; be reminded of the power of story and that what I write does touch readers; visit with friends I haven't seen in years; and, on top of all that, I get to talk about writing and books nonstop. The worst part? Being away from my family and eating food from airport vendors.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Did you enjoy reading *Between the Tides*?
2. Patti Callahan Henry's four novels have all been set, at least in part, in South Carolina's Lowcountry. Is that a big part of this book's appeal for you, or could it be set elsewhere and be just as effective?
3. How did Patti Callahan Henry use sand dollars in the novel to convey Catherine's anguish and redemption? What images particularly stick in your mind?
4. As in many of Patti Callahan Henry's previous books, *Between the Tides* describes an idyllic childhood that is abruptly changed by tragedy. Does Catherine Leary's childhood in Seaboro remind you of your own childhood? Have you ever experienced an abrupt wrenching away from a place that you loved?

CONVERSATION GUIDE

5. Discuss how the epigraph by William Shakespeare—“Whereof what’s past is prologue”—applies to the novel, especially to Catherine. Is it true in your own life, and of those people closest to you?

6. Life is rarely neat and tidy, and like Catherine, many of us lose our parents before we’ve come to terms with the unanswered questions that linger from our childhoods, with the wounds we suffered and the love we failed to acknowledge. What do you find most striking about how Catherine comes to terms with Grayson’s death? Does it remind you about anything in your own life?

7. How would you answer the three questions that Grayson meant to pose to Catherine: What do you want to be doing when you die? If you die today, what will you regret not having done? What do you want your tombstone to say?

8. Do you agree that “life is story”?

9. As a child, Catherine loved to read, but she stopped reading not long after Sam’s death. Have you ever abandoned an activity you once enjoyed? If so, why? Why is Catherine able to return to reading, and what regret does she feel?

CONVERSATION GUIDE

10. Grayson believed that novels could change people's lives. Do you agree? Is there a particular novel that had a profound impact on your life?

11. For years, Alice kept secret what she learned in the hospital room on the night Sam died. Was she right in doing so? Why does she tell Catherine now?

12. Children often interpret adult behavior in self-centered ways, and like the child Catherine, can blame themselves for events over which they had little or no control, carrying a burden of guilt and shame. How might the adults in the story have acted differently to spare her this anguish, or was her suffering inevitable?

13. Catherine believes that "Ellie and Mother were the antithesis of each other, and yet somehow together they made one complete mom for me." Discuss Ellie's and Margaret's strengths and weaknesses, as women and as mothers.

14. Discuss the roles of Boyd and Forrest in the novel. Do you think Boyd will ever find a new way to view the past, as Catherine does? Why does Forrest drive away at the end? Why does he return?