



READERS GUIDE

# The Art of Floating





To make good use of this readers guide, you will need the following:

- a whiteboard *or* a large piece of paper with markers
- snacks (cookies, chips, grapes, chocolate cake, etc.)
- a sense of humor
- a sense of wonder
- a computer with Skype, if you'd like to invite author Kristin Bair O'Keeffe to join your book club conversation (She'd love to! And while Kristin can't guarantee she will join every Skype conversation, she'll do her best to join as many as possible.)
- a Twitter account
- wine (optional; recommended)

Spoiler alert: This readers guide assumes you have read *The Art of Floating* from cover to cover. If you haven't, stop reading now! The following questions may contain spoilers.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When Sia decides to take Toad home with her after discovering him on the beach, do you cheer her on or bury your head in your hands and cry out, “Don’t do it!”? Why? What would you have done in her place?
2. It seems that Sia lives in one heck of a quirky town in which advice is dispensed from a church sign, piping plovers divide the population, and you’re never quite sure what is real or imagined. But is it really all that different from any town anywhere in the world? Aren’t there quirky aspects of any place if you dig deep enough? What’s quirky about your town?
3. M is a wildly passionate mother. How is she like or unlike mothers you know? What do you like about her? Does anything bug you?
4. Play a word-association game. Have one person in your group call out the following words while each person in the group writes down the first thing that pops into her head. Afterward, compare lists. How do your words differ? How are they similar? What does it all mean?
  - a. Gumper
  - b. the Dogcatcher
  - c. jump rope
  - d. Mrs. Windwill
  - e. piping plover

- f. Hannah Willow
  - g. spaceship
  - h. motherhood
  - i. Jackson
  - j. lost
  - k. Odyssia
  - l. found
5. Watch Buddhist roshi Joan Halifax’s TED talk “Compassion and the True Meaning of Empathy” ([http://www.ted.com/talks/joan\\_halifax.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/joan_halifax.html)). Then consider Sia’s deep reservoir of empathy. What role does empathy play in your culture/family/community? What value do you place on it?
  6. Kristin Bair O’Keeffe stretches the traditional structural rules of storytelling in this book. Some chapters are just one line long; one chapter contains nothing more than the definition of the word *fledge*. Which storytelling aspects of *The Art of Floating* do you most enjoy?
  7. Sia’s heartache over Jackson’s disappearance is so great that it often seems she’ll never recover. She gets a lot of feedback and advice from folks around town. What advice would you give her?
  8. You get to hang out with either Sia or Jilly for the day. Which do you choose? Why?
  9. The lines between reality and the imagined (or perceived) are often blurred in this novel: floating/not floating, fish/not fish, alien/not alien, lost/found, and so on. Does this mimic “real life” or are things in “real life” more cut-and-dried?
  10. When people around the world find out about Toad, they become territorial and go a little crazy. Dr. Dillard, for

example, is determined to put Toad in a psych ward. What does the world's response to Toad say about our culture today?

11. Do you want Sia and Toad to end up together? (Come on, be honest!)
12. Take a look at the epigraph, which is taken from Homer's *The Odyssey*, and consider the various other references to *The Odyssey* throughout the book (Odyssea's name, M's obsession with the book, Sia's journey home, etc.). What is reflected in these references? What is Sia's relationship to Odysseus?
13. While there's a lot of humor around the battle between the "plover lovers" and their opponents, there's also an essential question about the choices humans have to make about protecting the environment. How far should we go to save wildlife? Why? Does Sia's town take it too far by closing beaches for the plover?
14. With which character do you most associate—Sia, Jackson, Jilly, Toad, the Dogcatcher, M, or Richard? Why?
15. Jilly and Richard: Will they make it?
16. What made you laugh in *The Art of Floating*? What broke your heart?
17. How do you feel when you discover who Toad is and how he came to be that person?
18. Many things are lost and found throughout this story: Toad, Hiroshi Aomori, Sia's pen, M's virginity, Jackson, innocence, Sia's ability to write, the objects in the

Dogcatcher's house, and so on. Make a list of all the things you've lost and found throughout your life, big and small. Then study it. Talk about it. Compare it to lists others make. Hash it out. Make a bit of sense of it.

19. Movie time: Whom do you see playing Sia? Jackson? Toad? Jilly? M?
20. Got a question for Kristin Bair O'Keeffe? Send it to her via Twitter. She's out there in Twitterland waiting to hear from you (@kbairokeeffe). (Please note that Kristin will do her best to respond to all tweets but can't guarantee a response.)