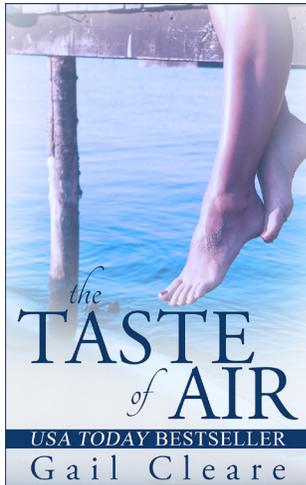


Book Club Discussion Guide

The Taste of Air

by Gail Cleare



About the Novel

“You think you really know someone, know them intimately, and then... you don’t.”

If you ever wondered what your mother is really like, or longed to retreat from the world, you should read *The Taste of Air*.

It’s contemporary fiction about two sisters who discover their mother has been hiding a secret life for over forty years. How they feel about this, and how it changes their lives, is the heart of the story.

When Mary Reilly turns up in a hospital hundreds of miles from the senior community where she lives in Massachusetts, Nell and Bridget learn that their mother has a second home, where she has obviously been living, on and off, for some time. Mary owns a lakeside cottage in the little town of Hartland, Vermont, and a set of complex relationships with people her daughters have never met.

The thread of mystery leads back to the middle of the 20th century, and it ties together all three women, the sacrifices they’ve made and the secrets they carry.

This family saga is also a blend of history, and mystery. Told in the present (2014) by Nell and Bridget, whose lives are both in flux for various reasons, we also hear Mary’s voice in chapters set in the past. The story of her life begins in 1967, in Saigon during the Vietnam War, and moves gradually forward through the years to the present. The points of view of these very different women are interwoven, revealing their secrets slowly as we learn how their lives are laced together in ways we never imagined.

Nell is a carpool mother of two and suburban New York City corporate trophy wife who secretly yearns for a life of her own. Bridget is a glamorous Washington, D.C. interior designer who transforms herself for every new man, always attracted to the

bad ones. Mary was a dedicated US Army nurse in Saigon during the Vietnam War, on duty at the Third Field Hospital during the Tet Offensive, then married handsome pilot Thomas Reilly and lived happily ever after...or did she?

Nell's reaction is emotional and intense, while Bridget is more intrigued by the hints of melodrama and romance. With Mary too ill to even speak more than a few words at a time, the sisters piece together the true story of their family's past from a trail of clues their mother has left behind in the cottage. Mementos she knew would be found one day, a gift to those she loved both openly and in private, transforming the future.

Mary's hideaway is a vault for family secrets never suspected, and the gateway to change for all three women.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever wished for a secret, private place where you could escape from your real life for a little while, with no repercussions? When and why?
2. Nell is stunned to find out her mother has kept such a big secret from her daughters, for all these years. How would you characterize her reaction? How would you feel?
3. Does your family have any amazing secrets that came to light only after the people involved had passed away? Did the revelations change anything significant?
4. When Mary was an Army nurse in Vietnam in the 1960s, the single women had no sanctioned access to contraception while most male soldiers were given condoms. Why was that considered a good policy? Have things changed since then?
5. Nell's husband David is a good man, a good father, and supports his family in a very comfortable lifestyle, yet she is still dissatisfied. Can you understand this, or do you think she is spoiled by privilege?
6. Bridget has a pattern of falling in love with the wrong men, and changing herself to try to please them. Does this ever work, for anyone? Why do you think she has this pattern? What events from her past may have influenced her choices?
7. In Saigon during the war, Mary heard rumors that lots of her co-workers were having clandestine affairs. She said it was because while surrounded by horror and

death, it was an effective way to assert that you were still alive. Have you ever been in a situation like this?

8. The scenes in Saigon during the Tet Offensive were written after viewing television footage and listening to interviews with journalists and military personnel who were there at the time (all now online). The Vietnam War was famously the first one America ever saw unfolding in their own livingrooms. Do any of your group's members remember watching the coverage on TV? What was that like?
9. Both Nell and Bridget go through major emotional changes while living in Mary's cottage in Hartland. How would you predict their lives will develop from here on, into the future?
10. Discuss the structure of the book, with the story told in three different voices by Nell, Bridget and Mary. Did you find this easy to follow? Did you learn more about each character from being inside her point of view? When Mary's chapters jumped into the past, how did it affect your feelings about the story in the present? Did you guess what would be revealed? Were you right?
11. Sometimes a family can be made up of the most unlikely people. How does Mary's secret change her family, and how do Nell and Bridget's discoveries redefine the family's future?
12. Thomas's decline into dementia is only one of the difficult symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease. Was Mary's way of coping with the stress of her caretaking duties inexcusable, or understandable?
13. In Hartland, people seem to understand what's most important. "Life is short. Be happy. That was it, the nutshell version." Do you agree? How do you address this in living your life?
14. After reading this book, do you have any thoughts about transforming your own life? Do you feel the message is optimistic?

Author Bio

USA Today bestselling author Gail Cleare has written for newspapers, magazines, Fortune 50 companies and AOL. Her award-winning ad agency represented the creators of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. She was the turtle Leonardo's date for the world

premiere of the second TMNT movie, and got to wear a black evening gown and sparkly shoes. Gail lives on an 18th century farm in Massachusetts with her family and dogs, cats, chickens, black bears, blue herons, rushing streams and wide, windy skies. She's into organic gardening and nature photography, and can often be found stalking wild creatures with a 300 mm lens.

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Editorial Reviews

“What begins to unfold from page one is a captivating story filled with mystery, suspense, love, longing and family...a poignant tale not to be missed.”

-Readers' Favorite (5 STARS)

“This is that kind of book, one so real and important that it bears at least a second reading - after the first sinks in.”

-Grady Harp, Amazon Hall of Fame Top 100, "Vine Voice" (5 STARS)

“One of the greatest riddles, it turns out, is a parent's real life, the one not shown to children. ...Skillful dialogue as well as brisk pacing and an effective resolution.”

-Kirkus Reviews

“A family saga bridging decades and filled with shocking revelations, hope and love, you won't be able put this book down.”

-Kate Moretti, NY Times bestselling author

“The book is beautifully constructed, revealing information a little at a time to keep us guessing...Cleare’s descriptions are vivid, and her story is charming...the perfect book to take along on a vacation — or peruse while sitting by the woodstove on a cool day”.

-Tinky Weisblat for *The Recorder*

“A compelling portrait of three memorable women and the unique bond that exists between mothers and daughters.”

-*Booked Solid* (5 STARS)

“Gail Cleare’s mesmerizing new novel...will make you see your own life with new eyes and leave you transformed.”

-Jamie Cat Callan, author of *Bonjour, Happiness!*

“My first thought after finishing *The Taste of Air* was that this was an incredibly satisfying novel. “

-*Bibliotica* (5 STARS)

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