

AUTHOR OF *THE SUMMER OF GOOD INTENTIONS*

WENDY FRANCIS

# Summertime GUESTS

"Riveting... A smart read  
with plenty of meat for book clubs."  
—BARBARA O'NEAL,  
*Washington Post* bestselling author  
of *When We Believed in Mermaids*



*a novel*



# Discussion Guide

## AUTHOR NOTE



Dear Reader:

If you walk down the streets of Boston's Seaport District today, you'll see gorgeous high-rise apartment buildings and hotels, upscale restaurants and night clubs, and stores like Lululemon and L.L.Bean. There are parks to linger and play in. The Harborwalk fronts the majestic federal courthouse and, farther down, the Institute of Contemporary Art. The newest kid on the block, so to speak, the Seaport District has become the place to see and be seen.

It wasn't always this way, though. Originally an unassuming shipping port back in the 1850s, the area fell into disrepair a century later. Aside from two landmark restaurants, Anthony's Pier 4 and Johnny's Harborside, there was little to see except parking lots and abandoned warehouses. But with the fruits of the Big Dig project, which moved the city's main thruway underground, and a four-billion-dollar cleanup of the Boston Harbor, also launched in the 1990s, the seeds for a spectacular rebirth were planted.

A few summers ago, while my family and I wandered along the waterfront and marveled at its transformation, I began to wonder, What if a hotel had existed here over a century ago? Would it still be around? Would it have attracted the famous and fabulous, like those who used to flock to Anthony's Pier 4? Those questions got my mind spinning.

I'd also been wanting to write a modern love story that centered on four different couples who were in various stages of a relationship—the promising first blush of new love, the more staid love of a couple trying to find their way back to each other after having a baby, the troubled roller-coaster love between two academics, and the stirrings of a thirty-year-old romantic flame in one woman. What better place to bring them all together than at an illustrious hotel?

I knew that the book would begin with a tragedy, one that could unite the guests. I debated if a woman plummeting to her death would be too gruesome, but the more stories that popped up on the news of someone slipping or falling or otherwise meeting their untimely demise from a great height, the more it seemed that such a tragedy, at the very least, would be believable. It also got me wondering how someone stares down the edge of death. Would drugs or alcohol be involved? How would the witnesses to such a tragic event be affected?

The result is ***Summertime Guests***, a mix of summery romance and mystery. I hope the novel will keep you turning the pages as well as give you a welcome, momentary escape. These are challenging times, to be sure, and my heartfelt thanks go out to all the wonderful readers, booksellers, reviewers, and social media folks who keep spreading the word about books. You all are the reason we writers write!

And here's to hoping that in the very near future everyone can return to a place like the Seafarer, where we can relax poolside and enjoy a refreshing drink with friends—without giving a single thought to a crisis, care, or worry.

Warmly,

*Wendy Francis*

# Discussion Guide

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



- 1) The Seafarer Hotel is a fictional hotel built in Boston in 1886, full of wealth, sophistication, and decadence. In ***Summertime Guests***, the lives of four very different characters collide there with very dramatic consequences. The hotel almost feels like a character in the book. Why do you think the author chose to set ***Summertime Guests*** at a hotel like the Seafarer? These characters are all at different places in their lives. Why did the author choose this moment to bring them all together?
- 2) Riley and Tom’s relationship seems to be ideal...until they start planning their wedding. Why do you think Marilyn becomes so involved in helping Riley plan the wedding? What do you think of the way that Riley handles Marilyn’s involvement and opinions? If you were in Riley’s situation, how would you manage this relationship? Do you think that her own mother’s untimely death has any effect on Riley’s relationship with Marilyn? Why or why not? And why do you think wedding planning so often causes tension?
- 3) The relationship of Jean-Paul and his wife, Marie, seems to have changed after their daughter’s birth. How would you characterize Jean-Paul and Marie’s relationship at the beginning of the novel? How has Isabella’s birth changed their dynamic as a couple? And how do you think their relationship changes as the story progresses? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from Jean-Paul’s perspective but not Marie’s?
- 4) The first time we’re introduced to Claire O’Dell, she’s driving by the house of Marty, her boyfriend from thirty years ago, anxious to see him again. She acknowledges that Marty “has continued to take up space in her mind, like an old, comfortable recliner she can’t bring herself to throw out.” Why does Claire think of him that way? How does seeing him and catching up in person change the way she thinks of him now? How has time colored her memory of Marty? And how have those memories affected her relationship with her husband, Walt?
- 5) Claire has very different relationships with each of her two children. She’s in more frequent contact with Amber and they seem to be closer, yet she’s entrusted her big secret to only Ben. Why do you think that is? Claire muses at one point, “Boys were funny that way. Men, too, as if whatever protective, worry gene women possessed hadn’t been passed along to them.” Why then did she tell only Ben the truth about her secret? If you were in Claire’s situation, would you do the same? What role does gender have in the relationship between parents and their children?
- 6) Claire seems to believe that Marty is “the one that got away” for much of her marriage to Walt. How did that impact her marriage and the way she saw her husband? Do you think Jason and Gwen will think of one another that way? Why or why not? What is the allure of “the one that got away”? Has there been “one that got away” in your life?

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- 7) Why do you think Jason has kept from Gwen the fact that he stormed out of his class and hasn't gone back since? And why do you think he's continued to lie to her about writing his dissertation? He worries that she "might be too good for him." Do you think that's true? Why or why not? And what do you think Gwen sees in Jason that makes her stay?
- 8) Throughout the book, the four main characters are forced to confront their pasts, time and again, in order to move forward to their future. For example, Jason is determined not to become just like his father, so much so that he has missed the warning signs that the one thing he fears most may be coming true. How do you think the past has shaped these four characters, for better and/or for worse? Do you think the cycle of the past can be broken? Which character exemplifies your beliefs the most? And the least?
- 9) The author brings these characters together at different moments in the story, whether the characters consciously realize it or not. For example, Jason and Claire are both at a pivotal moment in their lives when they meet at the hotel bar and they're more honest with each other as strangers than they are with anyone else in their lives. Why do you think this is? Claire suggests that "we like to fool ourselves.... But we don't know that a different path would have necessarily been better. It might have been worse. No, we all live the life we're meant to live." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- 10) In Claire's last scene in the book, she thinks to herself, "It's odd, but she's not at all scared up here. Because what's to fear when she's already facing the end?" Why do you think Claire climbs out onto the railing of the balcony? What do you think she intends to do? And what do you think is the significance of Walt's words to her? Do you think Claire's realization about the truth of her relationship with Walt has any effect on what happens?
- 11) Letting go of the past, forgiving, and embracing love—any kind of love—is at the heart of this story. How do Riley, Claire, Jean-Paul, and Jason accomplish this? And how do they fall short? Which character did you feel the closest to and why? Which character was the most unlike you? Did anyone surprise you at the end?

# Discussion Guide

## A CONVERSATION WITH WENDY FRANCIS

**The Seafarer is a fictional hotel with a long, colorful history and a sterling reputation, the place to see and be seen, and it feels like a major character in the novel. Is it inspired by a real hotel that you've either stayed at in the past or have read about? What about a hotel like the Seafarer interested you?**



The Seafarer is an amalgam of hotels, real and imaginary, that I would love to vacation at. The hotel probably closest to it in terms of aesthetics is the jaw-dropping Wentworth by the Sea in New Hampshire. Built in the 1870s, this stately white expanse perches on the small island of New Castle. With its own rich history, including hosting several presidents, Wentworth by the Sea offers ocean views, golf courses, swimming pools and tennis courts, elegant dining, and a spa. What more could you ask for? As for my interest in older hotels, I've always been drawn to those places that harbor their own histories—and stories. It's fun to imagine the people who came before you, who once sat in the exact same spot where you sit now, enjoying a summertime beverage.

***Summertime Guests* is full of twists and turns. When you began the story, did you know exactly how it would end? Were the characters' journeys solidified in your mind before you started writing? Did anything—or anyone—surprise you as you were writing?**

This was a different, and challenging, book to write because, for the first time, I actually knew the ending: a woman dies. What was less clear was how the characters' stories would intersect around that event. I knew the novel would be set at a tony hotel in the Seaport District of Boston, and I knew I wanted to explore various stages of love through four main characters. It took several drafts before the plotline and relationships came into full view, though. Plenty of people surprised me in the narrative, probably Jason most of all.

**Throughout the story, the reader gets an inside perspective into four very different relationships. Between Riley, Claire, Jean-Paul, and Jason, which character's perspective did you enjoy writing from the most? The least?**

Claire's and Jean-Paul's characters were the most engaging to write—Claire's because hers was such an intricate, difficult journey to plot, and Jean-Paul's because I could empathize with this poor man who's doing his level best to keep everything running smoothly at work and at home. Riley's experiences were a little more distant in my memory (all that young love!), and Jason's darker side forced me to write outside my wheelhouse.

# Discussion Guide

## A CONVERSATION WITH WENDY FRANCIS



**Many of your books are set during the summer. What about the summer intrigues you? Why does it lend itself so perfectly to the backdrop of a book?**

Summer has always been my favorite season. For me, it represents that almost sacred time when kids are out of school and work slows down a bit. My childhood summertime memories are wrapped up in family vacations, trips to the beach, lazy days reading on the back porch, and eating too much ice cream. Throw in some sunshine and the scent of sunblock, and I'm at my most content. Something about summertime also immediately says *relaxation*, and these days that sense of slowing down, of allowing ourselves the time to appreciate those "pockets of joy" with the ones we love most, seems especially important.

**Claire's last scene in the book is incredibly poignant. Why did you choose to end Claire's story the way you did? What significance did Claire's revelation about her feelings for Walt have on her death and the timing of it? Why did you choose to have her granddaughter, Fiona, be the last face she saw?**

Thank you. It was certainly one of the most difficult scenes to write. Without giving too much away, I wanted the book to end with Claire maintaining her dignity even in the face of incredibly difficult circumstances. As for Walt and Fiona, I think I'll leave it up to the reader to decide how those two may have influenced Claire in her pivotal moment. I will say that I wanted the ending to be hopeful.

**The characters in this book feel so vibrant and alive. How do you create your characters? Do friends and family ever find themselves—or parts of themselves—in the characters you create?**

I love character-driven novels, and so my own writing tends to lean that way, too. I also spend a lot of time (probably too much time!) thinking about what's going on inside other people's heads. So, putting those thoughts down on the page seems like a natural extension of what I'm imagining every day. As I write, though, the characters inevitably take on lives of their own and become much more complicated and nuanced than anything I'd imagined. And yes, my family absolutely worries that they'll end up in my fiction (especially because there's so much material there!), but I try to keep them out of it. I won't lie, though: a few conversations with my husband and kids have turned up in my books.

# Discussion Guide

## A CONVERSATION WITH WENDY FRANCIS



### What are your favorite books about romantic love? Which authors capture the feeling of love for you?

Oddly enough, the first thing that comes to mind isn't a book but a movie: *When Harry Met Sally*. This classic, starring Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal, is a valentine to both New York City and their relationship. I love the witty rapport between the characters, the humor, the darned wagon-wheel table (if you haven't yet watched, you must!). As for fiction, Sue Miller's *Monogamy*, which I recently read and adored, offers a brilliant depiction of a modern marriage, warts and all. Dani Shapiro's deeply honest portrayal of her marriage in *Hourglass* is another favorite, and for summer romance, there's nothing quite like an Elin Hilderbrand novel. As my husband will tell you, I'm a hopeless romantic, but I'm not a complete fool—I understand that life sometimes gets in the way. But that brand of love—forged in hard times and embellished in good times—gives rise to some of the best love stories out there.