

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THE LAST WAVE

Written by Gillian Best

1. The novel begins with a chapter from John's point of view. John's perspective is also the least reliable because of his dementia. Why does Best begin with this disorienting viewpoint? How does the opening chapter create the foundation for what is to come?
2. The narrative switches between different characters' perspectives and temporal settings in each section, often skipping decades from one page to the next. Martha describes John's memory loss as "time travel, skipping backwards and forward through the years at uneven speeds" (203), a quote that aptly describes the novel's narrative structure. How did this time travelling influence your reading of the novel? Whose perspective of events did you find most compelling?
3. Martha's first encounter with the sea as a young girl is a near-death experience of almost drowning (32). Why does Martha's life-long relationship with the sea begin with this moment of danger? Is Martha's connection to the sea a friendship? How would you describe it?
4. The topic of housework surfaces throughout the novel in relation to the female characters. Martha feels that housework is a bore (53), while we know that her mother loved home improvements and keeping a tidy house (112). What does the narrative say about women's roles and stereotypes through these characters and the younger generation that follows them?
5. The myrtle bush appears throughout the novel. Describing the bush in their front yard, Martha says she "planted it to remind [her and John] of a moment of love — but more and more it [reminds her] of what [she] had given up" (58). What does the myrtle bush represent for Martha? What does it represent for John, or Harriet? Why does Harriet name her daughter Myrtle?
6. Though not directly addressed in the narrative, the Second World War lingers in the background of the Dover setting through details such as Martha's father's missing arm. How does the ghost of the war take shape in the narrative?
7. The issue of memory and memory loss appears throughout the novel. When Martha is attempting her first channel crossing, John asks her questions about their life together to make sure she is still lucid (99). How is this act meaningful in light of John's later dementia? What does the novel suggest about the importance of memory and how we remember?
8. We read the events of Harriet's last Christmas dinner with her parents from two perspectives: first Harriet's (81) and then John's (187). Why does Best show us these different perspectives? What is different between them, and how does this inform your understanding of the evening?

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9. Martha and Sylvain have lengthy conversations despite their language barrier. Martha says that “the wonderful thing about Monsieur Sylvain’s lack of English was that [she] could speak with freedom” (171). How does their relationship function? What does the narrative suggest about communication in the context of romantic and family relationships, for Sylvain and Martha and otherwise?
10. More than once, Martha dreams about how her life would be different if she had been born in France rather than England, “Marthe instead of Martha” (174). Remembering a navy summer dress, Martha thinks about being a mirror version of herself, “but French, not English” (212). What does France represent to Martha?
11. When Myrtle goes to Martha’s house to introduce herself on page 225, Martha does not let on that she recognizes her granddaughter, though we later learn that she has many photos of her displayed in the house. Why does she do this?
12. Myrtle, who grew up swimming in a pool, describes her first encounter with the sea and the differences between swimming in the two bodies of water. She says, “I was used to the comfort of the black line at the bottom of the pool guiding me forward and back” (232). What do the differences between swimming in a pool and swimming in the sea signify? Why does Harriet initially forbid Myrtle from swimming in the sea?
13. Throughout John’s progressive dementia, he always remembers the ten pebbles in Martha’s leather swimming case and what they represent (322). Why does this detail remain in John’s memory despite his confusion and declining health?
14. When Martha plans for her first channel swim, the local church helps her raise the funds to pay the federation’s fees. When John’s health begins to decline, however, he is asked not to return to the church services. What role does religion play in the narrative, and what kind of community does it succeed or fail in providing?
15. The novel ends in a moment of suspense, with both John and Myrtle in the sea, in the midst of being rescued. What is the significance of John mistaking Myrtle for Martha in this moment? Why does Best end the narrative in this moment of tension?