

"A perfect beach read—fun, thoughtful, romantic!" —Ann Napolitano

novel

Cece Downing's Start Over Summer

Soon Wiley

Book Club Kit



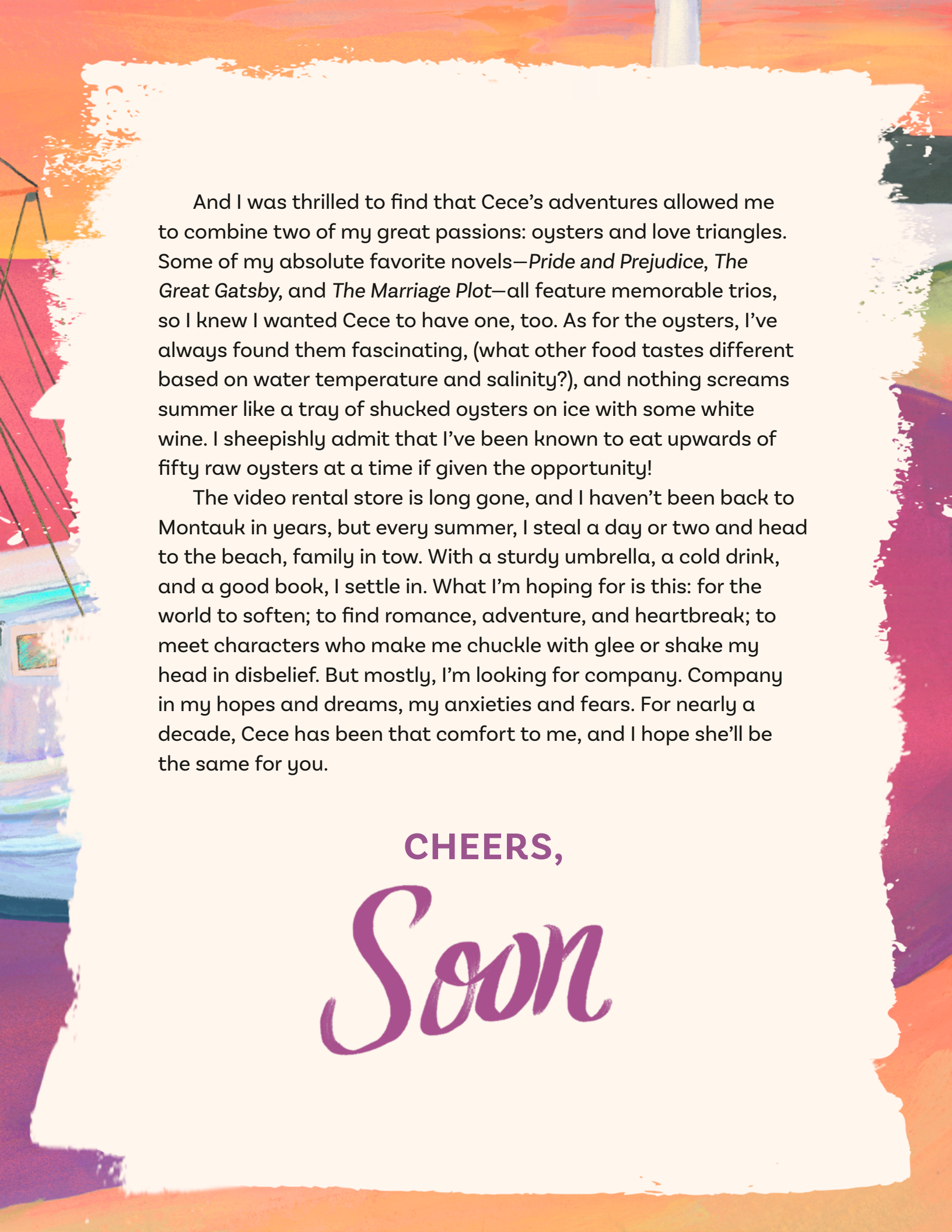
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Dear Reader,

I LOVE A GOOD BEACH READ. Every summer, when I was a kid, my parents would take me camping on the beach in Montauk. Some of my fondest memories—fishing, playing with hermit crabs, and boogie boarding—are from that time. When I got older, and I was allowed to bike into town, I'd head straight for Montauk Video, a movie rental store that also sold used books. It was here that I found hidden gems like Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm*, Judy Blume's *Summer Sisters*, and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. It's where I fell in love with beach reads, stories that were heartfelt and entertaining, full of romance, risk, and messy relationships all while giving you that blissful sense of momentary escape.

I wanted to create my own version of the perfect summer read. But first I needed to know where my story would take place, and I was drawn to New London, Connecticut. Having gone to college there, I knew a little bit about the town. It's a former whaling seaport with blue-collar roots, and makes for an interesting comparison with neighboring Mystic, a wealthy town now known mostly as a tourist destination. Thank you, *Mystic Pizza!* With its coastal atmosphere and rich maritime history, it felt like the perfect setting. It also provided an ideal refuge for my main character, Cece Downing.

Funnily enough, I'd created Cece nearly a decade prior for a short story. Nothing ever came of the piece, but my mind kept returning to her. I loved that Cece is a fighter! After being fired from the only job she's ever known and breaking up with her fiancé, she doesn't wallow in self-pity. Instead, she imagines a better future and goes after it. She finds work on an oyster farm, which she's entirely unqualified for. She pursues a summer romance despite her family's disapproval.



And I was thrilled to find that Cece's adventures allowed me to combine two of my great passions: oysters and love triangles. Some of my absolute favorite novels—*Pride and Prejudice*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Marriage Plot*—all feature memorable trios, so I knew I wanted Cece to have one, too. As for the oysters, I've always found them fascinating, (what other food tastes different based on water temperature and salinity?), and nothing screams summer like a tray of shucked oysters on ice with some white wine. I sheepishly admit that I've been known to eat upwards of fifty raw oysters at a time if given the opportunity!

The video rental store is long gone, and I haven't been back to Montauk in years, but every summer, I steal a day or two and head to the beach, family in tow. With a sturdy umbrella, a cold drink, and a good book, I settle in. What I'm hoping for is this: for the world to soften; to find romance, adventure, and heartbreak; to meet characters who make me chuckle with glee or shake my head in disbelief. But mostly, I'm looking for company. Company in my hopes and dreams, my anxieties and fears. For nearly a decade, Cece has been that comfort to me, and I hope she'll be the same for you.

CHEERS,

Soon

Discussion Questions

1.

Cece's firing, breakup, and move to New London set this story in motion. Do you think she sees these events as failures or opportunities? Does that perception change as the novel goes on? How does the book explore the challenges and joys of "starting over"?

2.

Cece moves from an analytical, numbers-driven desk job to one of manual labor at the oyster farm. How does this change affect her understanding of what work and purpose can look like? What commentary do you think the novel is making about white-collar versus blue-collar labor?

3.

Cece once believed life could be "charted out on graph paper" and that risk could be accounted for. How does this mind-set both help and hinder her as she navigates love, family, and her career? Why do you think uncertainty is so hard for Cece to grapple with?

4.

Cece's relationship with Morgan unfolds during a time filled with huge changes for her. What does Morgan offer her that's different from what her former fiancé did? How does Morgan surprise her throughout the story?

5.

Cece's mother has long pressured her to pursue financial security in both her career and marriage and, for most of the book, she encourages Cece to reunite with her wealthy ex. How do societal and parental expectations shape Cece's choices? How is the generational divide apparent throughout the book? How does Cece's mother ultimately surprise us, and how does her mom's choice in turn affect Cece?

Discussion Questions

continued

6.

In Cece's relationships with both Jonathan and Morgan, power imbalances arise. Who do you think calls the shots in each of these relationships? How does that impact how Cece feels about these men and the life she could have with each of them?

7.

The proposed Rayburn Oyster Farm expansion divides wealthy waterfront homeowners and working-class locals. How does this conflict come to define the story and Cece's perception of class in her new home? What does this divide say about money, gentrification, and environmentalism in communities like this one?

8.

Cece works at the oyster farm all summer but only near the end of the book does she actually eat an oyster and learn how to properly appreciate them. Why do you think that is? What does that say about her relationship with the natural world and sensory experiences?

9.

We learn that Cece has vowed never to get in a pool again after her swimming career ended badly, but she seems to view the ocean differently. What do these two bodies of water represent to Cece? By the end of the book, do you think she views her experience in the water with new eyes?