

THE
JELLYFISH
PROBLEM

BOOK CLUB KIT

TESSA YANG



DEAR READER,

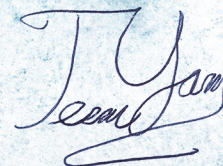
I've always regarded the ocean with fascination and fear. Those mixed feelings found a fitting mascot in sharks, which I've been obsessed with since I was a child. In addition to making me very easy to shop for (over the years I've received shark-themed socks, earrings, hats, pillows, pot holders, ice trays, even a toothbrush holder), having this special interest ensured I gravitated toward the movie *Jaws* when I was objectively too young to witness a great white chomping on hapless swimmers. Yet I was strangely enamored of the film, with its delicious jump scares, off-beat humor, and iconic, shiver-inducing soundtrack. I only wished the shark didn't have to die at the end.

This wish powered the earliest draft of *The Jellyfish Problem*. I wanted to write a sea monster story where the protagonist was driven by a desire to understand rather than destroy the monster. I did originally try to write about a shark before deciding they'd been given the monster treatment too many times already. Thus began a long and arduous research process. I read books, watched documentaries, listened to podcasts, and badgered my marine biologist friend with questions. I researched the folklore of Japan, my father's native country, and blessed my hyper-rational protagonist with her own childhood love of monsters. I wrote hundreds of pages and threw them out. Slowly, almost without my seeing it, the plot began to take shape.

I wrote this book while working full-time as an English professor. It was a job that exposed me to lots of people who've built careers around their own niche interests. Early in the book, Jo expresses appreciation for her boss at the aquarium, because they are "afflicted with the same curse of loving things no one else cared about." A lot of academics share this curse, which is also, of course, a gift. To love a subject not because it is trendy or expected or even practical but because it fits into a groove in your brain that is unabashedly you is, I think, one of the purest and most underrated loves out there. *The Jellyfish Problem* is an homage to that type of love, as well as the love that comes from friendship.

This is also a book about grief. I wrote the earliest pages as the world was still reeling from the pandemic. It's no coincidence that Jo's arc carries her from isolation to community, from suspicion to trust; I was on that journey myself, as so many of us were. With each successive draft, the book became a little brighter, a little funnier. It still grapples with some heavy themes, but I hope you'll take away a sense of hope from reading it: hope that old wounds can be healed, loves can be rediscovered, and our monsters can be redeemed.

With gratitude,
Tessa



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jo has loved jellyfish since childhood and has built a career around studying them. Do you have a subject that you feel just as passionate about?
2. Describe the friendship between Jo and Aldo. What do they have in common? How are they different?
3. Why do you think the *yōkai* appears to Jo throughout the story? What does he want from her?
4. Were you surprised by the reveal about the townspeople who have seen Clementine and the barrier? How does this tie into the theme of human connection? What method would you use to break free from the barrier?
5. Jo attends a town hall at which the townspeople decide to kill Clementine to stop the barrier from shrinking. Did you agree with Jo's decision to help kill Clementine? Do you think she had any alternatives?
6. Is there an antagonist in *The Jellyfish Problem*? Why or why not?
7. How have Jo's feelings toward community evolved from her arrival on Shattering Point to the end of the novel?
8. Describe the role that folklore plays in this novel. Are there specific folktales from your childhood that have stayed with you?
9. The chapters open with excerpts from the manuscript that Jo and Aldo had been working on. Why do you think the author chose to include the excerpts and commentary from Jo and Aldo?
10. How do you see themes of community, grief, human connection, and environmentalism reflected in the book?

