

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

A GUIDE FOR READERS AND DISCUSSION GROUPS

BOOK CLUB
GUIDE
SEA CROW PRESS

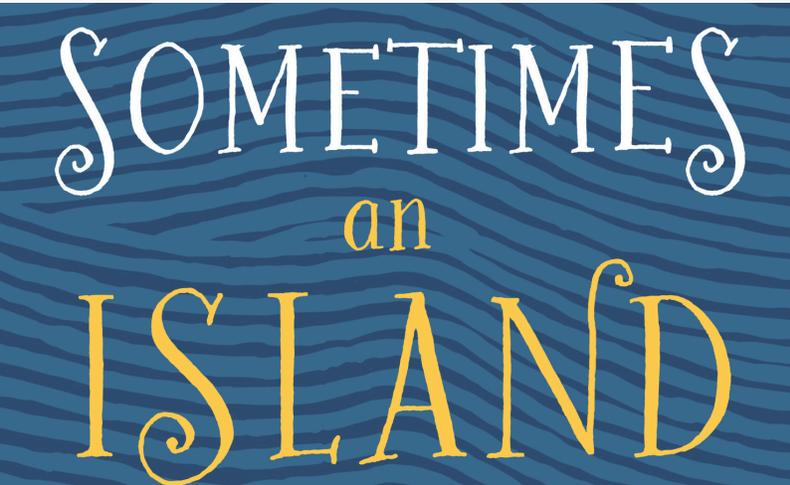
SOMETIMES an ISLAND

*A MOSAIC NOVEL OF FAMILY TIES, CLIMATE UPHEAVAL,
AND RESILIENCE.*

After Cossacks burn their home, ten-year-old Deborah and her father flee their shtetl to a remote island on Maine's Penobscot Bay, seeking refuge and a new beginning. More than a century later, their descendants are once again uprooted, this time driven by rising seas and a collapsing world.

ABOUT

Sometimes an Island & Ellen Meeropol



The Book: A family saga unfolds in the wake of ecological disaster. From coastal towns to higher ground, a new community emerges: off-grid, tightly knit, and forged from an unlikely alliance of island refugees, family from Brooklyn, friends from a fractured Massachusetts co-op, and others seeking sanctuary as the political landscape grows increasingly volatile.

Sometimes gritty, sometimes magical, and always deeply human, *Sometimes an Island* asks a vital question: How do we navigate an uncertain future armed only with our memories, our hopes, and the bonds that hold us together?

The Author: Ellen Meeropol's work focuses on the lives of women, especially those on the fault lines between political activism and family, and has been a finalist for the Sarton Women's Prize, longlisted for the Massachusetts Book Award, and selected by the Women's National Book Association as a Great Group Reads. Ellen lives in western Massachusetts, where she is a founding mother of Straw Dog Writers Guild.



Sometimes an Island

DISCUSSION GUIDE

01

The novel connects past and future migrations within one family. How do Deborah's early experiences shape the later generations' responses to displacement?

02

How does the idea of "home" evolve throughout the story as each generation faces upheaval and relocation?

03

The novel blends realism with moments that feel almost magical or symbolic. How did these elements affect your experience of the story?

04

Climate change drives much of the later narrative. How effectively does the novel balance personal stories with large-scale environmental and political crises?

05

Community becomes essential for survival. Which relationships or alliances felt most meaningful or surprising to you?

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06

The characters must constantly adapt to changing conditions. Which characters demonstrated resilience in ways that surprised you?

07

How does memory—personal and collective—shape decisions made by the characters?

08

The off-grid community represents both hope and challenge. What strengths and weaknesses did you see in this new way of living?

09

The novel raises questions about responsibility in times of crisis. What responsibilities do characters have toward family, community, or strangers seeking refuge?

10

Did the book leave you feeling hopeful, unsettled, or something in between about our collective future? Why?

Author Q&A

Sometimes an Island is a novel by Ellen Meeropol published by Sea Crow Press. It follows a family across generations, from fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe to facing climate crisis and rising seas in New England, to explore how communities adapt and survive together amid upheaval.

“My hope in this novel is that the increasing danger of climate disaster might help people bridge [the deep] divisions [in our society].”

Q. What drew you to place a pogrom-driven flight from a shtetl and a future shaped by rising seas in conversation with each other? What did that reveal to you about exile across generations?

A. My involvement with the current immigration justice movement has made me more aware of the long history of people migrating to escape violence or prejudice. We are in an urgent situation now, but these issues aren't new. Writing these stories is a way to understand the past and the present more deeply, from the perspective of characters from very different backgrounds and situations.

I'm curious about how the loss of everything familiar and safe affects us, and how we can carry the memories of the past with us as we build a future. Memory—personal, inherited, and communal—threads through the novel. How do the stories people carry influence the ways your characters respond to crisis and imagine what comes next?

The question of how our old stories influence us fascinates me. I think about my Russian grandparents who fled anti-Semitic pogroms and came to this country. They wouldn't talk about their previous lives, so I've had to use my imagination to write their stories.

As fiction writers, we often give objects the power to carry those memories; that's the role of the Matryoshka dolls in this novel. They are both very personal to the characters and carry a universality in their history.

Q. The island setting demands attention to weather, water, and limited resources. How does living so closely with the natural world shape the values and daily choices of the community you imagine?

A. The island in the novel, once a haven for those fleeing pogroms, becomes a perilous place. At the mercy of rising sea levels and the need to import many essentials, it changes from a place of refuge to a place no longer able to sustain life.

The characters build a new community in rural inland Maine, a setting with its own challenges. Those of us who dwell in towns and cities are disturbingly out of touch with the natural world and what survival demands of us: how do we heat our homes, grow our food, find fresh water? How do we clothe ourselves and treat common illnesses? These questions feel increasingly urgent to me. I wonder if once the profit motive is disrupted by external forces, people might forge communities built on cooperation. Perhaps it's our best chance of survival. The community that forms in the novel brings together people with very different histories and politics—family from Brooklyn, former co-op members, island refugees, and others seeking sanctuary. What interested you about exploring cooperation and conflict under those conditions?

The deep divisions in our society, and the emphasis on identity politics, have convinced people that we can only communicate with those who agree with us. We've become unable, unwilling, to reach out beyond the familiar. My hope in this novel is that the increasing danger of climate disaster might help people bridge those divisions. In addition, I wonder if once the profit motive is disrupted by external forces, people might forge communities built on cooperation. Perhaps it's our best chance of survival.

“Those of us who dwell in towns and cities are disturbingly out of touch with the natural world and what survival demands of us: how do we heat our homes, grow our food, find fresh water.”

Q. Much of the novel lingers on adaptation of food, shelter, labor, and care rather than spectacle or collapse. Why was it important to ground the story in the ordinary work of survival?

A. I understand why so many climate novels focus on the details of the apocalypse: they are dramatic and terrifying, and lend themselves to page-turning plots. I purposely left the catastrophic details in the background in favor of the resulting human emotions and the desire to rebuild.

A major challenge of writing climate fiction is balancing both science and story, and despair and hope. The climate emergency is real, but if our stories focus too much on the science, they can be very grim. If we soft-pedal reality in pursuit of a storybook ending, it feels dishonest. So grounding this novel in the work of survival—honoring the memories of those lost and learning or relearning the skills necessary to move forward—felt like the most honest and hopeful route I could take.

