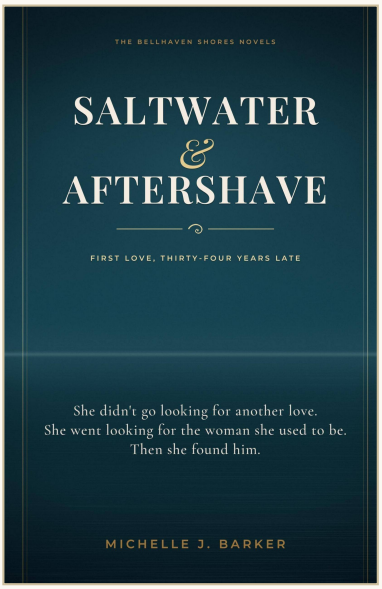
A READING GROUP GUIDE

Saltwater & Aftershave

a novel

MICHELLE J. BARKER



FIFTEEN QUESTIONS

a host sheet, a note from the author, something to eat, and an open invitation to your living room.

The author will join your club.

Half an hour by video, free, no minimum group size, and no need to have bought the book new or all at once.

michellejbarker.com

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HERON & ASH

FOR THE HOST

One page, and then you can stop reading

You chose the book, so this page is yours. Everything after it is for the group.

Open with this, before anyone has had a chance to be reasonable

"Whose side were you on, and when did that change?"

It is the best question in this guide and it is deliberately not numbered. Ask it first, go round the room, and do not let anyone qualify their answer.

Ninety minutes, if that is what you have

0 to 10	The opening question above. Round the room.
10 to 35	One question from The silence and one from The marriage.
35 to 60	One from The children. This is where your group will disagree most.
60 to 80	One from The town and one from The objects and the ending.
80 to 90	The closing question on page 7. Nobody has to answer out loud.

If you only have an hour, use these six

Two silences, and whether they are the same (1) · A good marriage that was not the whole truth (4) · The name on the list (6) · What Claire is actually defending (8) · Casseroles and coffee (10) · The photograph, and what Elle chooses to believe (14)

Three things worth knowing before the evening

- Question six has ended friendships in the author's own kitchen. That is not a flaw in the question. Save it for when the group has warmed up.
- If you are reading it over two meetings, break at the end of Chapter 15. The book changes gear there.
- The questions assume everyone has finished. There are no spoiler warnings past this page.

The author will join you for half an hour by video, free, with no minimum group size. Clubs use her best in the last thirty minutes, after the real argument has already happened. Write through the contact form at michellejbarker.com with your club's name, roughly how many of you there are, and two or three dates.

FROM THE AUTHOR

A note before you begin

I spent thirty years in rooms where people try to explain themselves to each other and get it wrong. Not because they are liars. Because the true thing is expensive to say, and there is almost always a cheaper sentence sitting right there.

That is the whole engine of this book. Two people stood on the same beach thirty-four years ago and each walked away with a different account of what the silence between them meant. Neither account was a lie. Both were built carefully, out of real evidence, by a person doing their best. And each one cost its owner most of a life.

So the questions in this guide are not really questions about Elle and Adam. They are questions about the private explanations we build for other people's silences, and how rarely we go back and check them.

A warning, kindly meant: a few of these will start an argument. Question six has ended friendships in my own kitchen. That is not a flaw in the question.

Thank you for giving this book an evening of your lives. I know what an evening is worth.

Michelle J. Barker

How to use this guide

There are fifteen questions here. No club needs all of them. A good ninety-minute discussion runs on five or six, and the ones that work are the ones your particular group disagrees about.

They are grouped in five movements. If you are short on time, take one from each: the silence, the marriage, the children, the town, the ending.

I. THE SILENCE

1. Two silences, and whether they are the same.

Adam wrote twice. Both letters came back marked no forwarding address, and he kept them in a drawer at his father's house for years. Elle wrote twice as well, once in the last week of her sophomore year, once in the spring of her junior year, and mailed neither. The second one she withheld on purpose. Adam's silence was circumstance. Elle's was a decision.

Does the novel hold them to the same standard? Should it? And did you notice yourself forgiving one of them faster?

2. "Careful is the only thing I have ever been that I'm ashamed of."

Adam names his own carefulness as cowardice with better manners bolted on the front. He says he has hidden inside it for fifty-four years.

Is he right about himself? Or is he being unfair to a man raised in a place and a family where you did not ask for things, and who is now applying a vocabulary to his own past that was never available to him at the time?

3. The staircase.

Elle owned a house with a set of wooden stairs down to the cove and did not walk down them in thirty-one summers of marriage. Her children grew up on that beach. She stayed at the top.

What were those stairs, exactly? Not what did they symbolize, but what was the actual mechanism that kept a grown woman at the top of them for three decades? Do you have one?

II. THE MARRIAGE

4. A good marriage that was not the whole truth.

Thirty-one years. Two affairs. A stretch of counseling. Separate bedrooms at the end. And Elle still describes it, without irony, as a good marriage.

Can both of those things be true at once? Did you believe her, or did you think she was managing you, and possibly herself?

5. Richard, who is never in a scene.

Richard Whitfield is dead before page one and is arguably the most active character in the book. He leaves a list. He leaves a tape. He leaves a message with his son.

By the end, did you like him? Is the novel fair to him? And is there something slightly unanswerable about a man who arranges everything from a position where he cannot be questioned?

6. The name on the list.

Richard's last list is chores: a rotted board, a light over the workbench, a railing to strip and restain, the rowboat, life jackets nobody will actually wear. And, tucked in among them: Ask Adam Hale about the flat spot on the roof. Elle decides she will never find out what he meant by it. She chooses to hold it as a gift rather than a coincidence or a betrayal she invented to let herself off the hook. She says: “I can't prove that. I've stopped needing to.”

Is that wisdom or is that evasion? What would you have done, and be honest, because most people say wisdom and mean they would have spent the next four years trying to find out.

III. THE CHILDREN

7. The message Michael carried for a year.

In the week before he died, Richard asked his son not to let anybody keep his mother standing guard over him, and made Michael say it back. Michael then sat on it for a year, because he could not work out whether it was his to give or his father's, and because every time he picked up the phone it came out sounding like permission for something she had not asked about.

Was he right to wait? Is there a version of this book where he never tells her at all, and would that version be a tragedy or just an ordinary family?

8. What Claire is actually defending.

Claire is twenty-seven, teaches seventh-grade English, and needs her mother to remain a widow. She is the book's hardest character to like and the one most readers end up recognizing. By Chapter 28 she has worked out that she is tired of being the one still standing guard.

What is she protecting: her father, her mother, or her own childhood? Have you watched an adult child do this to a parent? Have you been the adult child?

9. Whether a parent owes an explanation.

Elle spends most of the novel deciding how much of her interior life her grown children are entitled to. She is not secretive so much as reluctant to be the subject of a family discussion.

How much does a widowed parent owe an adult child: information, timing, a say? Does the answer change if the parent is a mother rather than a father? Your group will not agree on this one.

IV. THE TOWN

10. Casseroles and coffee.

Bellhaven Shores will discuss you over its coffee all morning and then leave supper on your step at dusk so you do not have to cook through whatever the talk has cost you. Sandra Whitlock leaves a dish without knocking, specifically so Elle will not have to perform gratitude at her own door.

Is that kindness with surveillance attached, or surveillance with kindness attached? Would you rather grieve in a town like that, or in a city where nobody notices?

11. Nadine Foley is not wrong.

Nadine is the novel's scold, and then her grievance turns out to be real: for three years after her husband died, Richard called her on the twelfth of every February, asked about her furnace, and stayed on the line the extra five minutes it takes a person not to feel like a chore. Last February the phone did not ring, and she sat by it until nearly noon before she remembered why.

Did the book earn your sympathy for her, or buy it too cheaply? And is her actual complaint, that the town has already got its bunting out for the next thing, a fair one?

12. "Old friends."

Asked straight out at the boatyard whether it was serious, Adam laughed it off and said they were old friends and he was giving her a hand with the house. It is the worst thing he does in the book, and it is a very small thing.

Why does something that small land that hard? And did Elle forgive it too fast?

V. THE OBJECTS, AND THE ENDING

13. Two messages sent forward in time.

A mason jar under a cedar log at Cutter's Point, sealed with wax, holding two promises written by a nineteen-year-old and a twenty-year-old who could not say them to each other's faces. And a cassette of the ocean that Richard recorded for grandchildren who did not exist yet, "in case you ever want to know what it sounded like the summer before you were born."

Both are messages from people who could speak to the future but not to the person in front of them. Is that cowardice, or is it a real and decent form of love? Does the novel decide?

14. The photograph, and what Elle chooses to believe.

The book ends with a photograph in unfamiliar handwriting and no way to establish who took it. Elle says she spent most of a summer wanting someone to hand her an answer, and every time she got close to one it turned out to be a decision instead. So she decides: that Richard knew something, left it where she would find it, and never once made her carry the weight of him knowing.

Is that peace, or is it a story she is telling herself? Is there a difference? And does the ending of this novel depend on the reader agreeing with her?

15. Saltwater, and aftershave.

The title gives you a place and a person.

Which is which? And does that hold all the way to the end of the book?

One question to close on

If your discussion has run long and good, finish with this rather than a summary.

Every person in this novel has a private explanation for somebody else's silence, and every one of those explanations is wrong. Whose silence are you currently explaining to yourself? You do not have to answer out loud.

SOMETHING TO EAT

A Bellhaven supper, if your club does that sort of thing

The novel is set on the North Carolina coast in early summer, and almost every act of love in it arrives as food somebody did not ask for. None of this is required. It is here because clubs ask, and because it is the right kind of evening for this book.

The easiest version

- A covered dish supper, with nobody knocking. Everyone brings one thing and leaves it on the counter without announcing it. That is what Sandra Whitlock does for Elle, and doing it yourselves will tell you more about Chapter 10 than any question in this guide.

If you want the coast on the table

- Cold steamed shrimp with Old Bay and lemon, in a bowl, with another bowl for the shells. Eaten standing up, which is the point.
- Hushpuppies, or cornbread if nobody wants to stand over hot oil.
- Sliced tomatoes with salt, and nothing else on them. In June this is a whole dish and anyone who tells you otherwise is from somewhere else.
- Deviled eggs, because somebody always brings them and somebody always finishes them.
- A pound cake, plain, or lemon icebox pie if the evening is warm.

To drink

- Sweet tea, in a pitcher, with the ice already in it. A cold beer, the unserious kind. Or a crisp white if your group is wine people, in which case something you would drink on a porch rather than something you would discuss.

One small thing

If you want a detail from the book on the table, put out a plate of something nobody made a fuss about and do not mention it. Half the kindness in Bellhaven Shores is delivered that way.

AN INVITATION

The author will join your club

Half an hour by video, free, no minimum group size, and no need to have bought the book new or all at once.

Clubs generally use me best in the last thirty minutes, after the real argument has already happened. I am happy to answer anything, including what Richard knew, which I will answer honestly and which you may not like.

To arrange it, write through the contact form at michellejbarker.com with your club's name, roughly how many of you there are, and two or three dates that would work. I will come back within a week.

Also useful for clubs

- This guide may be photocopied, emailed and reposted freely. No permission needed.
- A printable copy is at michellejbarker.com, along with a short piece on the two letters Adam wrote that do not appear in the novel.
- If your club would rather read it over two meetings, the natural break is the end of Chapter 15.

ABOUT THE BOOK

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle J. Barker studies relationships. Not the people in them, taken one at a time, but the thing that exists between them, which is harder to see and is usually the part that is hurting.

She holds the Doctor of Clinical Social Work degree, is a Licensed Master Social Worker in the state of Connecticut, and teaches graduate-level psychopathology courses. Before the scholarship there were three decades in community-based services and agency leadership: adults with developmental disabilities and dual diagnoses, the families standing beside them, and the agency she founded in New Jersey to serve both.

Saltwater & Aftershave is her first novel. The people in it are invented and the rooms are ordinary, and what she is watching in them is what she has always watched.

She was a northeastern coastal girl before she was anything else. She lives now in North Texas with her husband, John, and a kitten named Pearl, who has never once been impressed by any of it.

Varnish and Ink, the second of the Bellhaven Shores novels, is being written.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Scan to know when the next book is coming. Scholarship, fiction, or culinary. Choose what you want. Nothing else, ever.

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