

A Simple Thing

by Kathleen McCleary

Reading Group Guide

1. Can you relate to Susannah's desire to protect her children? Is her decision to go to Sounder reasonable given the circumstances? Why or why not?
2. Barefoot was an eccentric character. Describe the other characters' relationship with Barefoot and what he taught them about their own lives before his death.
3. Susannah recognizes the absurdity of coming to live on an island when she is afraid of both water and boats. Do you think Susannah subconsciously picked this place to finally face her fears? What changed about Susannah from the time Barefoot first taught her how to drive the boat to the scene where Susannah must drive the boat to save Quinn's life?
4. Katie makes some bad decisions (dating a "bad" boy in school before they moved, getting drunk, writing a poem about marijuana, etc.). How might you have handled these events? Did Susannah overreact? How much of this is normal teen rebellion?
5. Compare the accidents that Betty and Susannah experienced—the one that led to the death of Betty's husband, and the one that led to the death of Susannah's sister. How are these two incidents similar? What affect did they have on both characters' lives? How did each woman come to terms with these events by the end of the book?
6. After the accident with her sister, Susannah imagines living on an island where she can escape—an island with no one on it. Why do you think Susannah wants to go there? What is it about Sounder that helps her relive this dream?
7. Did your thoughts about Lila, Susannah's mother, change after you learned that she had been pregnant the day of the accident? What guilt do you think she lived with? Describe her relationship with Susannah. How might it be different going forward?
8. Was Susannah's decision to take her children to Sounder ultimately selfish or selfless? Was it fair to her husband, Matt? What lessons did it teach her children? Who benefited most from the decision, Susannah or her kids? Would your view be different if Quinn had not gotten to the hospital in time? How do you imagine their lives were changed when they returned?
9. Could Susannah have achieved what she achieved in the book if she had stayed at home?
10. Barefoot says "I believe love—real love, not lust and infatuation, but romantic love that includes deep, caring, generous, kind, and often selfless commitment—is the preeminent and transcendent moral value. It trumps the marital vow. We fulfill our deepest human potential in the context of loving relationships. That can't be wrong." Do you agree? Disagree? Was Betty's relationship with Barefoot "wrong" because she was involved with him while married to Bill?

11. What were some of the similarities between Susannah's life and Betty's? What could Susannah learn from Betty?
12. Did living on Sounder change Susannah? How? Did it change Katie? Quinn? Why did it make a difference?
13. Why did Betty move to Sounder? Do you agree with her decision? What could she have done differently?
14. Do you think Susannah and Matt end up happy in the long run?
15. Many of the characters in the book—especially Susannah, Betty, and Lila, Susannah's mother—struggle with feelings of shame. Barefoot tells Betty she needs to learn the difference between guilt and shame: "It's okay to feel guilty about something you do. But this shame—this feeling badly about who you are—it's unnecessary, and it's wrong." What could Susannah have done to help herself feel less shame? What about Lila?