

READING GUIDE FOR BEACH TRIP

1. *Beach Trip*'s major theme concerns the effect of time and life changes on friendship. Do you think lifelong friendship is possible? Did Holton effectively explore this theme with her own characters? Did their relationships feel realistic to you? Is the theme of lifelong friendship relevant to your own life? Have you ever lost a friend due to a monumental change in one of your lives? What do you think are the qualities necessary for enduring friendship?
2. The novel is prefaced with the quote "In youth we learn; in age we understand." How does this apply to the book? Was there redemption in this novel for any of the characters? Does Holton's use of multiple voices and flashbacks work well in the telling of this story?
3. Which of the four main characters do you most identify with and why? Were Lola, Mel, Sara and Annie well developed, and were their problems and decisions realistic? The male characters in the novel were secondary. Did they seem believable? How were they important to the story?
4. In her youth, Mel realizes that "Life wasn't about perfection. It wasn't neat and tidy. It was about loss and longing." How does this help explain her relationship to her childhood, her relationship with J.T. Radford, Lola, Annie and, especially, Sara? Mel's character comes across as being overbearing and self-centered, but do you feel she genuinely cared for Sara, Lola and Annie? Do you think Mel's decision to help Maureen and Briggs thwart Lola's elopement was realistic? Do you think she thought she was doing the right thing for Lola? Was it telling that Lola's final letter was addressed to Mel, and not Annie or Sara?
5. If Mel had made a different decision regarding J.T. Radford, how might her life have been different? How might her friendship with the other three have been affected? Have you ever regretted a decision you made and wondered what your life might have been like if you'd decided differently?
6. Sara spends a lot of time worrying about her children. She seems to feel that her family's happiness rests entirely on her shoulders. Can you identify with this? Do you think her feelings of responsibility and guilt are rooted in the fact that she experienced a relatively happy childhood herself, that she grew up in a time when roles for women were more narrowly defined (and in some ways, more easy to achieve)? Do you think that, as modern women, we've been raised to *expect* we can have it all - career, family, self-fulfillment? Who do you think had it easier, our mothers or us?

7. Lola, Sara, and Annie had somewhat different mothering styles. Do you think each was a good mother? Do you think Mel's decision not to have children was a valid one? If you have children, how has motherhood enriched your life? How has it made it more difficult?
8. At the beginning of the novel, Annie comes across as being the most rigid and uptight of the group and yet by the end, she's the character who has perhaps changed the most. Was her transformation believable? How does her relationship with her husband, Mitchell, sustain her through this process? Is unconditional love often a catalyst for personal transformation? Why? Do you think Mitchell would love her less if he knew about Professor Ballard? How does Agnes Grace help to bring closure to Annie's story?
9. As a girl, Lola is forced by her mother to play with the tyrannical Charlotte Hampton. How does the scene where Lola finally locks her tormentor in the crawl space foreshadow the end of the novel? Do you know of marriages like Lola's? Why do you think women stay in these situations? Given Briggs' obsessive and relentless nature, the violence of his reaction to Lonnie, and to Lola the first time she tries to leave him with their infant son, Henry, do you think Lola could have done anything other than what she did at the end of the novel? Were you surprised by the ending or did you see it coming?
10. Did you think the story was funny, disturbing, sad or moving? What made you choose the book? Did it live up to your expectations and would you suggest it to others?