



Ship Sooner

By Mary Sullivan
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Introduction

Ship Sooner hears everyone and everything in her sleepy Massachusetts town. Sounds of frost forming on glass; a rabbit hopping on just fallen snow; and a fork crimping a pie crust are as clear to Ship as an old Sinatra tune played full volume at the town diner. Misunderstood by her classmates and ignored by her disdainful older sister, she consoles herself by listening to the sounds other people make: her mother's lips pressing against those of a balding salesman's; her sister Helen's trysts in a secluded shed; family friend Trudy's breath quickening as she cuts the hair of the town priest; and her only friend Brian Dodd's promising his parents not to tell where he goes with them on Sunday afternoons.

Ship's isolation intensifies when Brian disappears inexplicably the day after Christmas. During the long winter of 1981, as Helen retreats behind her slammed bedroom door and her mother is increasingly absent, Ship keeps vigil for Brian and slowly loses hope. But as winter melts to spring, an unexpected cry from the woods will lead her to make an astonishing discovery that compels her to abandon all that she has known, and to set out on a journey that will transform her life.

This is the story of a gifted young girl who comes to realize that what has made her different from others has also led her on a path to become her truest self. In vibrant prose, Mary Sullivan captures the tender and tough essence of an adolescent whose extraordinary sensitivity teaches us to listen for those softest of sounds -- of hope, need, and desire -- that whisper through our lives.

Questions for Discussion

1. Ship Sooner's miracle hearing was inspired by profiles of autistic children who possessed one heightened sense. Discuss how Ship's extraordinary gift impacts her life. If you had to choose one sense to be heightened, which would you choose? What drawbacks do you think possessing such a gift would involve?
2. Mary Sullivan fills **Ship Sooner** with sounds that the human ear cannot register. After reading **Ship Sooner**, were there any sounds that you found yourself more in tune with -- or wishing that you could hear?
3. In the small town of Herringtown, Massachusetts, where everyone knows everything about everyone, how does the fatherless Sooner family stand out? In your opinion, does their community of women: Trudy, Teresa, Helen, and Ship constitute a "family"? How does setting the novel in the early 1980s influence how the family would be judged by the community?
4. In what way does Ship's best friend Brian Dodd understand Ship as no one else does? In what ways does he betray her? How does Brian's fascination and interaction with Helen change Ship's perception of her friendship with Brian?
5. Ship says, "I wish I was normal." Do you think Ship becomes more "normal" as her exceptional hearing diminishes? If there had been a medical procedure available to reverse the effects of Ship's gift do you think the Sooner family should have pursued it?
6. Many secrets are unearthed in the course of **Ship Sooner**, both literally and figuratively. Discuss how Ship's discovery of secrets -- from Teresa's boyfriends; to Trudy's crush; to Mr. Gray's phone conversations; to Johnny's existence -- drives the story forward. What secrets were a surprise to you, and what secrets did you expect? In listening into the lives of those around her, does Ship "use her hearing wisely," as Father Hannah commands?
7. Ship Sooner's hearing is both a "blessing" and a curse. Talk about how her hearing makes Ship an exceptional and troubled adolescent. In a world where we are constantly bombarded with sounds, what is her hearing a metaphor for?
8. How did you feel about Helen when you learned that she had abandoned her baby in the woods? Do you feel that the first person narration allowed readers to achieve a significant glimpse into possible range of emotions and motivations that drove Helen Sooner to hide her baby in the woods?
9. Do you think hiding Johnny away in an institution and forcing Brian to pretend he was an only child scarred Brian's emotional development? Do you think that Mr. Dodd will grant Mrs. Dodd's wish and let Johnny come home to stay? Do you think Mrs. Dodd will be able to recover from the oppressive shame and guilt that kept her confined to her house?
10. When Ship finds the baby buried in the woods, what is her first reaction? What does she learn in the course of taking care of the baby? Discuss the importance of mothering in **Ship Sooner**. What makes, or does not make a good maternal figure? Does one need to give birth to a child to serve as a maternal figure?
11. Does Helen's persistent claim that their father preferred her over Ship impact Ship's sense of self? Are there any men in the book who are capable of serving as a father figure to Ship? Why or why not? Few details about Teresa's relationship with Ship's father, or why they ultimately separated are revealed. Do you wish that you had learned more about Ship's father? Why do you think the author chose to keep Teresa tight lipped despite her daughters' intense desire to have answers to their questions about him?
12. There is no epilogue at the conclusion of **Ship Sooner** to tell us how life has changed for the Sooner family, or for Ship. Do you think that the time chronicled in this novel will always stand as the pivotal time in Ship's life? How do you think Ship's story ends? Do you think growing up and moving past adolescence will change Ship's life, or allow her to finally find happiness?

About the Author

Mary Sullivan is the critically acclaimed author of the novel **Stay** -- winner of the Rona Jaffe Foundation Award and a St. Botolph Foundation Award, as well as a volume of poetry. One of eleven children, she grew up in Medfield, MA and attended University of California at Berkeley where she received her B.A. in English. She lives in Cambridge, MA with her husband and two daughters.

Suggested reading:
The Heart is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers
Backroads by Tawni O'Dell

Geeklove by Katherine Dunn

Blessings by Anna Quindlen

Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons

Rain by Kirsty Gunn

The Tiny One by Eliza Minot

Stay by Mary Sullivan