



## A Simple Thing

By Kathleen McCleary  
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### Introduction

When Susannah Delaney discovers her young son is being bullied and her adolescent daughter is spinning out of control, she moves them to remote, rustic Sounder Island to live for a year. A simple island existence with no computers or electricity and only a one-room schoolhouse is just what her over-scheduled East Coast kids need to learn what's really important in life. But the move threatens her marriage to the man she's loved since childhood, and her very sense of self.

For Betty Pavalak, who moved to Sounder to save her own troubled marriage, the island has been a haven for fifty years. But Betty also knows the guilt of living with choices made long ago and actions that cannot be undone. The unlikely friendship between Susannah and Betty ignites a journey of self-discovery for both women and brings them both home to what they love most. *A Simple Thing* moves beyond friendship, children, and marriages to look deeply into what it means to love and

forgive yourself.

### Questions for Discussion

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 is an eccentric character. Describe the other characters' relationship with Barefoot and what he taught them about their own lives.
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 before the move. How might you have handled these events? Did Susannah overreact? How much of this is normal teen rebellion?
5. Compare the accidents Betty and Susannah experienced. 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 her secret? 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?

## **About the Author**

Kathleen McCleary teaches writing at American University. A former columnist for HGTV.com, Kathleen's writing has appeared in numerous publications, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA WEEKEND*, *Good Housekeeping*, *More*, *Health*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. She lives in northern Virginia with her husband and two daughters.