

Book Club Kit





Letter to Book Clubs

The origins of *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships* are intensely personal. My father is the youngest of five children, and I have a large extended family filled with cousins. When I was very young, my twelve-year-old cousin, Chad, passed away unexpectedly. A few months later, his four siblings came to stay with my family for the summer.

My mom is the quintessential fun aunt, and our cousins would visit Florida often. Mom always filled our summers with adventure: beach days, trips to the park, museums. Something as mundane as going to the grocery store can be an adventure when my mom is involved.

I only have vague memories of that particular summer, but the way my mom describes it has always stuck with me. It had all the usual excitement you'd expect of spending summer in South Florida with your fun aunt, but beneath it all, bubbling up when you least expected it, was intense grief.

I'll never forget the day I first thought of the idea for this book. *What if, I thought, a woman caring for her nieces the summer after their brother's death found love when she was least ready for it?* I was nervous when I called to ask my mom what she thought. We talked about that summer for a while, and though Chad had died nearly twenty-five years before, I could hear her holding back tears when she said, *You're really going to hit a nerve with this.* (In Mom's book, this is a good thing.)

And so, with her blessing, *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships* was born. It's funny when I think back to the original idea for this story, because the whole working-on-a-superyacht angle wasn't there. That also has family origins, strangely enough.

Originally, I'd intended for Jo to be a teacher. I needed to give her a job that would allow her plenty of time to spend with her nieces, and teaching is what I know. One day, a friend suggested I give a character the same job as my sister, who is a yacht stewardess. As soon as she said it, I knew it was exactly what the book needed. Later that month, my family came to visit for Thanksgiving, and my sister introduced me to the show *Below Deck*. That entire visit was spent binge-watching *Below Deck* with my family, sometimes until three in the morning. It's one of my favorite holiday memories.

Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships was the story I needed before I knew I needed it. I had just finished revising the book when my husband fell ill, nearly died, and received a diagnosis that turned our lives upside down. Like Jo, I suddenly found myself plunged into the worst summer of my life, fighting to keep my head above water, grief threatening to swallow me up. So many things (and people) got me through that summer, and this book was one of them. I have no doubt that having just taken Jo through her grief and to the other side helped me get through my own.

I always knew this book would deal with some heavy stuff, but my goal wasn't to write a tragedy. To me, *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships* is a book about hope. One that celebrates our capacity to find joy in the midst of suffering, and the power of one generous heart to heal another.

Time is our most valuable asset. Thank you for spending some of yours with this book. I hope reading it gives you even a fraction of the joy that writing it gave me.

Xo,

Sarah





Author Q&A

How different was the first draft of *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships* from the final? What was the biggest change you made?

I changed almost everything! In the first two drafts, Jo was still dating her ex, Shitty Peter. I absolutely despised writing him and would avoid writing any scenes that included him. My agent suggested I make Peter more likable, but I hated him so much that I didn't want to! One morning, as I was eating breakfast and stewing on the issue, I thought, *I wish Peter didn't exist!* And then it hit me: I'm the author. I can do that.

Moving Shitty Peter to backstory was the best decision I made in revisions. It involved rewriting about 80% of the book, but it forced me to find better obstacles for Jo and Alex. It also gave me more space for fun stuff! More Alex! More Mia and Kitty! More bucket list adventures!

I recently looked over a printed version of the second draft I have in my closet. When I compared it to the final draft, I couldn't find a single page that hadn't changed significantly.

What was the hardest part about writing this book?

For the most part, *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships* was pretty easy to write. It was hard work, but I had so much fun that it didn't *feel* like work. The hardest chapter for me was the karaoke chapter. It was really challenging to write a karaoke scene without including the lyrics. I spent hours listening to the song Jo and Alex sing on repeat as I wrote that scene. The scene immediately after that was also challenging to write, but for different reasons. I won't say *too* much in case you haven't gotten there yet!

***Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships* is an adult novel, but has three teenaged characters who are important to the story. What was it like to write these characters, and how did you approach them differently than your adult characters?**

I currently teach at a university, but in a previous life, I was a middle school

teacher. I absolutely adore teenagers. They are fun, their emotions are huge, and their insight will hit you out of nowhere. Jo's nieces, Mia and Kitty, were baked into the premise of the book, but their personalities didn't truly develop until later. Alex's daughter, Greyson, is perhaps my favorite character. She's also the one who surprised me the most. She has a pretty big role in the third act, which I didn't initially plan for, but developing Jo and Greyson's friendship was one of my favorite parts of the writing process.

Just like any adult character, teenagers have wants, flaws, and fears, but they act and speak differently than adults do. I really tried to hone in on that with Mia, Kitty, and Greyson's dialogue.

Mia's was the most challenging because she often came off sounding too much like an adult. I ended up writing each line of her dialogue in a notebook, and for each one asked myself: What would a sixteen-year-old understand about this situation? How would Mia communicate (or try to communicate) this idea? Most of us, but especially older teenagers, rarely say exactly what we mean.

Kitty was an interesting character to work with because she is so incredibly smart and yet so incredibly clueless. I loved playing with those contrasting halves of her throughout the story. I don't remember where I got the idea for her to be obsessed with *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, but it was a blast to work it into the book, especially when it annoyed Mia!

Greyson was the most fun of the teens to write dialogue for. She is very much an embodiment of my thirteen-year-old self. Whenever she was on the page, I turned off my adult brain, went full-on thirteen-year-old Sarah, and typed whatever random thing came to mind.

What sort of research did you do for this book?

Most of the research for this book was related to yachting. My sister is a yacht stewardess, so I asked her a lot of questions to make sure what I'd written was accurate. Some events that take place on the yacht are inspired by her experiences. Watching *Below Deck* was probably the most useful (and fun!) research I did. My sister confirms it pretty accurately portrays what it's like to work on a yacht. I tried to work in as many *Below Deck* Easter eggs as possible when I was revising.

Jo has a bucket list of 30 things to do before her 30th birthday. Have you done all the items on Jo's list?





Ha! Jo is much more adventurous than I am. There's absolutely no way I'd put skydiving on my list. I estimate I've done about half of the list (including the decluttering).

Jo's list is another thing that changed a lot as I revised. It was fun to think of things that could be reinterpreted in interesting ways, like the Zefron-a-thon and Coral Castle (which is a real place, by the way).

Jo, Mia, and Kitty all deal with their grief over Samson in different ways. How did you approach that while writing the book?

I didn't intentionally set out to say something about the different ways people grieve. It was a natural product of getting to know each of the characters. Jo was the only one whose relationship to grief I really intended to explore. To Jo, both love and grief are dangerous, so she would rather avoid them in an attempt to keep herself from getting hurt. This leads to plenty of fun distractions throughout the book, but also to almost all of the problems she has to overcome.

Mia's and Kitty's relationships with grief were based more on their personalities than anything else. I knew I wanted Kitty to be someone who was naturally very sensitive. I'm not a crier (Don't tell anyone, but a book has never made me cry!), but I have some wonderful people in my life who are deeply emotional. I admire their depth of feeling so much and wanted to put that into Kitty, which of course impacted how she grieves her brother. Mia was all attitude from the very beginning, and I knew that would translate into her grief as well. She so badly wants to connect with the adults in her life but doesn't know how to ask, and so she turns to anger. Her guilt wasn't layered into the book until much later.

Will you be writing any more yacht books in the future?

Yes! My next book, *Luck and Last Resorts*, is about Nina and Ollie. Initially, I didn't plan to write a book for Nina, but by the time I'd finished the third draft of *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships*, she had stolen my heart. I really wanted to know what was up with her and Ollie (I had no idea when I was writing *Love, Lists, and Fancy Ships*), so I decided to give Nina her own story so I could find out! *Luck and Last Resorts* takes place during charter season, so coming up with more yacht shenanigans has been a lot of fun.

Which character are you?

1. What can you be found doing in your spare time?

- A.** Whatever anyone else wants to do is fine with me. As long as I'm with my favorite people, I'll have a great time!
- B.** Falling down a YouTube rabbit hole.
- C.** Reading, of course!
- D.** Thrifting, going to parties. Anything, as long as I'm out and about!
- E.** Something creative, whether that's playing music or experimenting in the kitchen.
- F.** Working out and swearing.
- G.** Playing The Sims.

2. What's your favorite snack?

- A.** Pop-Tarts
- B.** Cheez Whiz
- C.** Lemon cake
- D.** Pizza Rolls
- E.** A charcuterie board
- F.** Anything I don't have to make
- G.** Potato chips



3. In your friend group you're...

- A.** The dependable one
- B.** The hyper one
- C.** The one with the disturbing facts
- D.** The one you'd call to bury a dead body
- E.** The one who won't stop singing
- F.** The lone wolf
- G.** The one who always has a witty comeback

4. What's your go-to karaoke jam?

- A.** LOL, nice try. No way in hell am I singing in front of anyone.
- B.** A Taylor Swift song, of course!
- C.** Whatever my friends want me to sing with them!
- D.** A suggestive pop song.
- E.** A classic jam everyone knows.
- F.** A sappy love song.
- G.** Whatever is most popular on the radio right now.

5. What is your dream job?

- A.** Pirate
- B.** YouTube personality
- C.** Anything related to books!
- D.** Celebrity dolphin trainer
- E.** Award-winning chef
- F.** Anything that pays the bills
- G.** Graphic designer

6. At a party you can be found...

- A.** Taking photos of everyone else
- B.** Forcing everyone to dance
- C.** In a corner reading
- D.** Inappropriately overdressed
- E.** In the kitchen
- F.** Drinking and swearing
- G.** Gossiping with your BFF

7. Your go-to outfit is...

- A.** Whatever's clean
- B.** Athletic wear
- C.** The hand-me-downs your sister gave you
- D.** A unique vintage piece from your favorite thrift store
- E.** A fitted T-shirt and dark-wash jeans
- F.** A graphic tee with a sarcastic saying on it
- G.** Your favorite hoodie (even if it's 1000 degrees out)

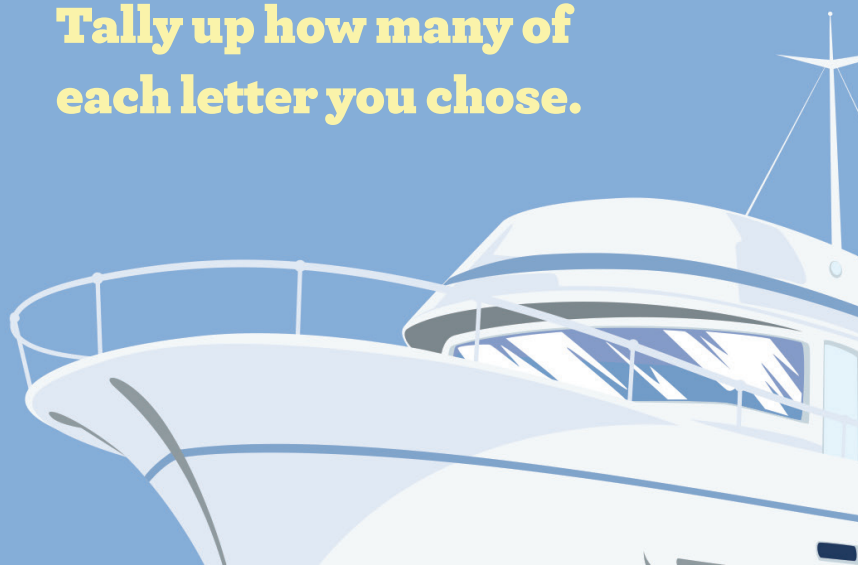
8. Your dream vacation includes...

- A.** Something adventurous, like zip-lining or parasailing
- B.** A ghost tour
- C.** Visiting a cute bookstore
- D.** Checking out a flea market
- E.** Eating at a Michelin-starred restaurant
- F.** Some fecking peace and quiet
- G.** Good wi-fi

9. Your most-listened-to playlist is titled...

- A.** Songs my AMAZING BFF made me listen to
- B.** Running jams
- C.** In my feels
- D.** Songs that make me feel like a bad b!tch
- E.** Songs to sing along to
- F.** Oldies but goodies
- G.** ANGST!

Tally up how many of each letter you chose.



If you got...

Mostly A's - JO WALKER

You might not be a social butterfly, but the people you love know you've got their back. You would give up anything for your friends and family, even your dream vacation. If the people you love are happy, you're happy.

You don't take a lot of risks with your heart, but that doesn't mean you're boring. You're always up for an adventure, whether that's checking out some weird local landmarks or chugging margaritas poolside with your bestie. But karaoke? That's where you draw the line.

Mostly B's - GREYSON HAYES

You take the phrase "Go big or go home" literally. You're a high-energy person whose mind runs a mile a minute, whether you're thinking about serious things, like Reptilians impersonating public figures, or silly stuff, like that pair of sneakers you had with wheels on the bottom.

People think you're always happy, and you are most of the time. But when you're angry? Everyone better watch out! You can be a completely different person when you're pissed off. One who might angrily sing a Taylor Swift song in a public venue just to make a point.

Mostly C's - KITTY TAYLOR

You're smarter than everyone else, and they know it. Book smart, that is. Sure, you can recite ancient Chinese military proverbs off the top of your head and read more books in a year than most do in a lifetime, but when it comes to people, sometimes you have no idea what's going on.

Young at heart, you're a sensitive soul and try to see the best in everyone. Just because you cry a lot doesn't mean you're unhappy or immature. You simply have big feelings that demand to be felt.

Mostly D's - NINA LEJEUNE

You're the life of the party. In fact, you turn any gathering into a party whether or not said gathering was intended to be one. Charmingly inappropriate, people have a hard time knowing how to read you,



which is fine by you. You don't care if you're liked or understood.

You might seem all fun and games, but you take your work seriously. You have high standards for yourself and everyone else. If someone can't get with the program, you have no problem shoving them out of your life (or into the Mariana Trench). A loyal friend, you'd have no problem burying a body for your BFF. But even those who know you best don't know everything. A girl has to have some secrets, right?

Mostly E's - ALEX HAYES

You have a relaxed and goofy exterior, but there's more to you than meets the eye. You are passionately creative and more ambitious than people give you credit for. You're the one who is calm in a crisis, able to find a logical solution even in heightened emotional situations. Your open personality makes it easy to make new friends, but you have a hard time trusting people. You've been burned in the past, but the person who is hardest for you to trust is yourself.

Sarah: When I took this quiz, I got Alex! I can confirm he is the character I'm most like, despite the fact I can't cook at all!

Mostly F's - OLLIE DUNNE

Just because you swear like a fecking sailor doesn't mean you hate everyone. That tough exterior is just to keep everyone else from knowing how tenderhearted you really are. You're an intense soul who loves fiercely. You might not have many friends, but the people lucky enough to be in your life appreciate your insight and honesty, as you have no problem calling them on their BS.

Even though you come off as insensitive and abrasive, the truth is you're a romantic at heart. When you find something you love, whether it's a song, a food, or a person, you have a hard time letting go and moving on, even if you should.

Mostly G's - MIA TAYLOR

You are effortlessly cool, even when you're just in your coziest hoodie and messy bun. You are quick on your feet and know how to outwit someone easily. You have some anger beneath that calm and cool exterior, though, and when you're hurting, you can lash out instead of asking for what you need.

Fortunately, the people in your life know you love them. You're the best person to call for a chill night of watching reality TV.



Playlist

“BLINDING LIGHTS”

The Weeknd

“WORK”

Rihanna, Drake

“BEGIN THE BEGUINE”

Artie Shaw

“AIN’T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH”

Marvin Gaye, Tammi Terrell

“LET’S GET IT ON”

Marvin Gaye

“THE MIDDLE”

Audrey Assad

“CAKE BY THE OCEAN”

DNCE

“BAD BLOOD”

Taylor Swift

“I BELIEVE IN A THING CALLED LOVE”

The Darkness

“AFTER HOURS”

The Weeknd

“SHILOH”

Audrey Assad



Discussion Questions

1.

Have you ever done any of the experiences on Jo's bucket list? How many of them? Which items would you add to your own bucket list? Which items would you never do in a million years?

2.

Which of the list items Jo completes in the novel did you enjoy the most? In what way did completing that item contribute to Jo's growth over the course of the story, if at all?

3.

Jo states in the first chapter that she loves her job. After having read the novel, what is it about yachting that you feel appeals to someone like Jo?

4.

The novel depicts many types of relationships: romantic, sisterly love, extended family, friendship, the bond (or lack thereof) between parents and their children. How did each of these types of relationships impact Jo? Was one more impactful than the others? How many different portrayals of each type of relationship (for instance, between sisters) can you find?

5.

Jo, Mia, and Kitty grieve Samson's death in different ways. What differences and similarities did you notice in how these characters cope with loss? Did one way of grieving feel healthier or more authentic to you? Consider your own experiences with loss (this can be any sort of loss). Which character do you feel best reflects your own experiences? Why?

6.

Early in the novel, Jo thinks about “how it was impossible for some of the best things in [her] life to exist without the worst.” Are there any good things in your own life that came after painful circumstances?

7.

When Jo discovers that Alex is not only her new neighbor but also the new chef on the *Serendipity*, Alex tells her he believes these coincidences are fate. Are you, like Alex, “inclined to think everything happens for a reason?” Or do you relate more to Jo, who doesn’t believe in fate?

8.

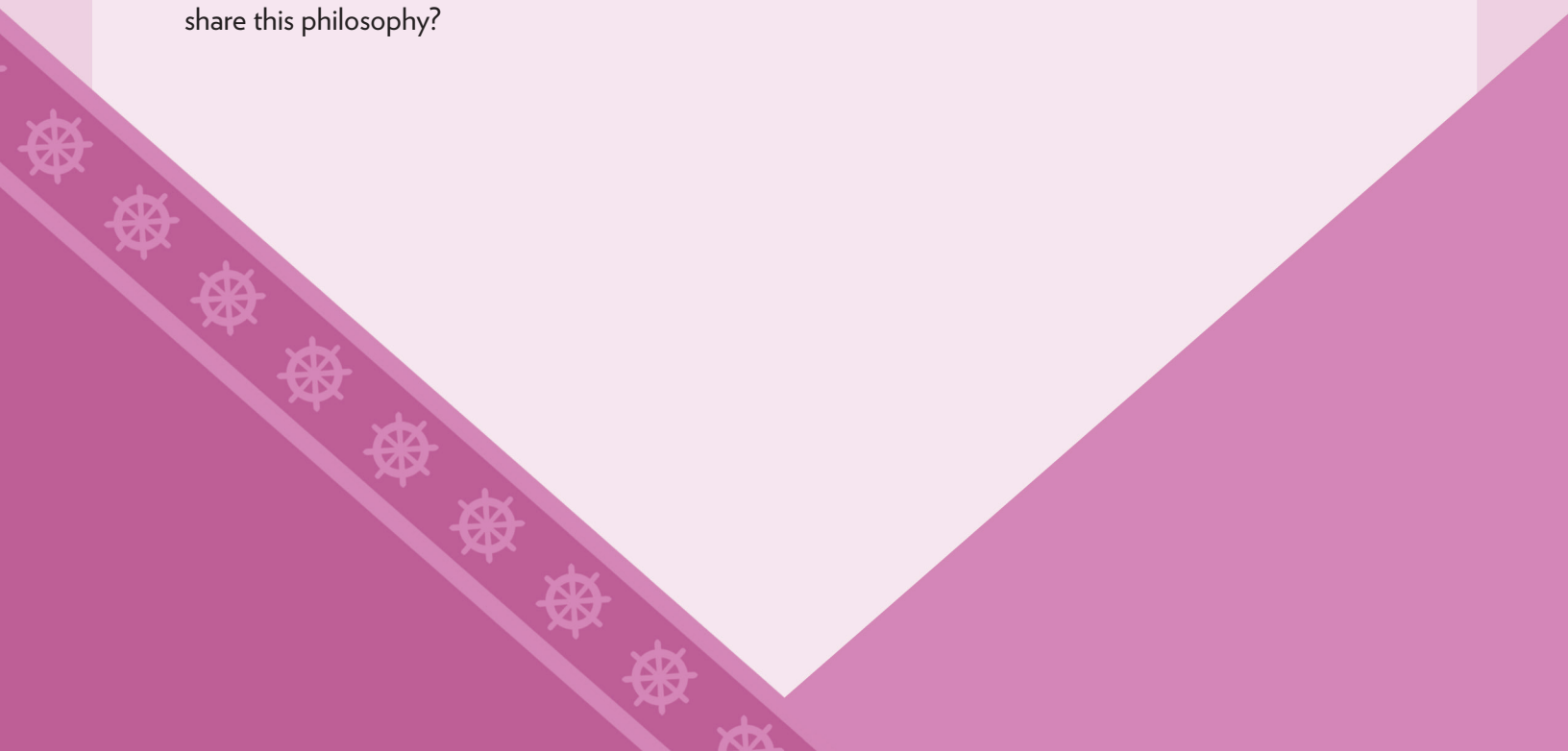
Despite their initial attraction to each other, both Jo and Alex are resistant to considering a romantic relationship. What is it about Alex that you feel appeals specifically to Jo? What is it about Jo that you feel appeals specifically to Alex?

9.

At Coral Castle, Jo tells Alex that she thought the list would help her figure out what she wants from life again. Have you, like Jo, ever felt that you “should know who [you] are by now”? Do you feel Jo has a better sense of herself and what she wants by the end of the novel? Or does she learn something else entirely? What role did her list play in this transformation?

10.

At the end of the novel, Jo thinks: “The good, the bad, how could you untangle it? It was impossible. So why not take the good where you could get it?” How does this signal a shift in Jo’s perspective? Do you share this philosophy?



About Sarah Grunder Ruiz

Sarah Grunder Ruiz is a writer, educator, and karaoke enthusiast. Originally from South Florida, she now lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband and two children. She holds an MFA in creative writing from North Carolina State University, where she now teaches first-year writing.

sarahruizwrites.com

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