"A riveting tale of piracy and shipwrecks with an insightful and attentive eye on the roles of women so often overlooked by history."
—JILL McCORKLE, author of *Life after Life*, for *The Lightkeeper's Wife*

The LAST SAILOR

a novel

SARAH ANNE JOHNSON

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. How does the Boyd family cope with losing Jacob?

2. What are some of the themes in the novel?

3. What are the different ways Nathaniel and Finn respond to their father's pressure to live a life like his?

4. How does the natural environment inform the characters and the story?

5. Why does Nathaniel exile himself to the marsh, and what brings him home again? What enables him to make the transition from living on the marsh to living in his father's house?

6. In what ways do the brothers give in to their fate, and how do they resist it? Why do they respond so differently?

7. How much of the story is fate, how much is timing, and how much is the characters' volition?

8. Do you feel that the story stays true to the characters' motivations?

9. Can you imagine an alternate ending?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

How did *The Last Sailor* first come to you?

I was reading *Suttree* by Cormac McCarthy, and the main character's isolation as he rowed along the river resonated for me. The character of Nathaniel Boyd was a response to that feeling. As a kid, I grew up across the street from an expansive marsh that captured my imagination. I fantasized about living on one of the far islands by the bay. In a way, the novel is an exploration of that fantasy and of the fact of loneliness that we all share in perhaps less radical ways. The idea of someone struggling to live with an awful loss is often a fact of life, but in Nathaniel's case, the fact that the loss occurred when he was such a young man and responsible for his younger brother led to an extreme response, and this interested me as a novelist. What could bring Nathaniel in from that lonely existence on the marsh? What would have to happen to bring him home?

How much of the novel is autobiographical, and how much is invention?

So much of writing springs from the nest of experience and imagination that lies within. As I said, the marsh is real. I

lived there and dreamed about it long after I was gone. It was a home to return to again and again, a place where I could re-engage with that childhood fantasy through the life of Nathaniel Boyd. I also have a strong background growing up on the water and sailing, and I'm drawn to disasters at sea over and over again. I'm not sure what psychic vein that impulse is tapping, but it sure would be nice to know! As far as the characters and situations go, those are all a product of my imagination.

You've done many interviews with authors, including two books of interviews and a book on how to interview writers and creative people. How did conducting these interviews inform your writing?

Those many interviews were my literary training ground. I read all the books by each author I interviewed, then read articles about them and any other interviews they did. I steeped myself in the writing world of each author, then asked them anything I wanted to know. It doesn't get any better than that for a writer. I went straight to the source with any questions I had about craft, the creative process, living the life of a writer. You name it, I asked it. Then I transcribed the interviews, so I was able to inhabit the authors' words in a unique way that helped me absorb what they were saying. Additionally, connecting with authors and publishing the interviews put me in touch with a literary community that went beyond my immediate circle, which provided inspiration and support while I worked on my novels.

What draws you to write novels rather than short stories?

I love the landscape of a novel and knowing that I'm going to hang around with the characters for the long haul. I'm drawn to exploring broad periods of time. I admire short story writers tremendously. They have a special set of skills that I don't have—they're able to create worlds in a few pages. I need at least three hundred pages to figure out what I'm trying to say.

Is it difficult as a woman to write male characters? How do you inhabit their experiences?

Theoretically, a writer should be able to inhabit any character's perspective. It's an act of compassion and empathy. I don't find it more or less difficult to write about men. In some ways, writing men is easier because it's purely an act of imagination and I feel freer.

This is a story set in the aftermath of trauma. What drew you to this difficult terrain?

I was interested in the ripples that such a loss would create on a family. The loss happens in a minute, but the aftereffects take place over years and even decades. I wanted to explore how characters operate around loss, how they come together and move apart, how they react in their own lives separate from the family, and how they think about what's happened. This is rich terrain that I couldn't turn away from once it found me.

What is your process like for developing a novel?

So much of writing is revising and deleting. I let myself loose on the first draft—anything goes. Then I have to get a grip and see what this book is that I'm dealing with. I have to get rid of anything that feels outside the story's characters and themes. Anything that doesn't touch a nerve has to go. Then I deal with what's left over, move things around, write to fill in the gaps, then revise, revise, revise. There is no end to the revisions, but it's all in service of the characters and telling their truest story.

Richard Ford once said that place is a character in fiction. Do you agree?

Yes, I do, and yet I don't think about it as I write. Place sets a mood and a tone for the novel and can also echo a character's reality. I find that this happens without my thinking about it—the characters and the landscape or weather work together in unfathomable ways.

How does your reading life inform your writing life, and what are you reading now?

I read for at least four hours a night. I believe that what goes in comes out, so I'm very careful about reading great literature, whether classic or contemporary. I underline passages that speak to me in terms of what I'm working on now, and I often write things down. Not everything I read inspires me to

do this, but still, the language and technique get into my brain. Who knows how it plays out in what I write? I just know it does. I'm reading the novels and stories of Patricia Hensley, a biography of Frederick Douglass, and *Wild Decembers* by Edna O'Brien. I'm struck so often by the poetry of fiction that I have to stop and read passages over and over, just to take in all the nuances of language.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a novel set in 1923 during Prohibition. One of the main characters is a rumrunner in Provincetown. I've done a lot of research, and I'm having a great time writing it. The beginning phases of revision are always daunting, but this novel has a life of its own—all I need to do is keep showing up.

I'm going to ask you the question that you end all your interviews with. What would you say to new writers working on their first novel or stories?

I think I've said this before, but read, read, read. Everything you need to know, you'll find in books. It's also critically important to keep your ass in the chair. When you think about getting up, wait fifteen minutes. Resist the cup of coffee, the mail, petting the dog—just sit. You'll be writing before the fifteen minutes is up. Trust me.