

Folly Discussion Questions



1. The novel explores several kinds of "family." In what ways is a created family, such as the one Rae develops on Folly Island, the same as one based on blood, and how is it different?
2. One of the most important relationships in the novel is between Rae and her long-dead uncle Desmond. Although they never met, could you say that their lives intertwine?
3. Mental illness and its associated stigma are basic to this novel. Does Rae's tendency to depression help or hinder her quest to rebuild herself and Folly? Do you think Rae's illness is truly internal and hereditary, or does it have external causes, stresses that crack her mental foundations?
4. According to Rae, "there were times when a person had to hide, there were things it was best to ignore." What do you feel about Rae's decision to stop therapy, move to a solitary island, and throw out her medications? Do you agree with Don's claim that Rae was trying to commit suicide? Do you think the author is suggesting that people with mental problems ought to dump their meds?
5. This is a novel about rebuilding, both physically and emotionally. What, or who, are Rae's "psychic collar ties" that contribute to the rebuilding of her self? Is making a house--a concrete object that once erected, stands for a lifetime--an adequate metaphor for rebuilding a person?
6. Folly Island is almost a character in the novel. How would Rae's story be different if she had remained in her California hills, or moved to the desert? How would your own life be different, if you had grown up in a vastly different setting? Are the elements of Folly Island--the hidden treasure that is Desmond's cave, the unguessed foundation of Allen's own hideaway--more plot or metaphor?
7. Dreams, letters, and journals appear regularly in the novel. How does the author use them to talk about things we might not otherwise see? Have you ever had a dream that delivered a powerful message?
8. Jerry points out to Rae that, "just because you sometimes hear things that aren't there, that doesn't mean there's never anything there. I'd guess, in fact, that's one of the reasons you're here, to prove that you can tell the difference." Do Rae's imagined Watchers shield her, while they also interfere with her ability to perceive actual danger? What prevents her from recognizing the danger she is in?



Folly Discussion Questions continued . . .

9. Rae is surprised to find herself becoming part of an island community, observing that “No man is an island – nor, it would appear, woman.” In what way do people make communities--in a group of islands, on the Internet, in the anonymity of a city? How does her new community contribute to her rebuilding, both physically and mentally?

10. Rae comments to Jerry that she’s constantly running into “war and rumors of war” on the islands, and earlier she refers to having “been through the wars” herself. What were her wars? Who else is she talking about? What is it about the islands that draws veterans of wars both political and personal?

11. Appearances can often be deceiving in this novel. How do characters like Ed the tattooed philosopher, Petra the equestrienne goth, Jerry the gentle giant, and Allan the altruistic veteran play on our assumptions about each of these archetypes? Which of the book’s characters see past the surface, and which fail to do so?

12. The relationship between Rae and Tamara evolves over the course of the novel. Given their history, do you think Tamara’s reaction to Rae’s final breakdown (“Not again!”) is understandable or unforgivable? Have you ever found it impossible to be sympathetic about someone’s outrageous behavior?

13. Rae does things many women could not imagine: she makes her living through physical labor, she tackles a huge and exhausting job single-handed, she takes herself into a setting most women would consider at least spooky, if not downright dangerous. Is Rae a realistic character? What does it say about the restrictions placed on women that the freedom to do these things is not an option?

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