

The Unsinkable Greta James

Jennifer E. Smith



BOOK CLUB KIT

AUTHOR LETTER

Dear Reader,

Unlike Greta James, I'm not a rock star. (To put it mildly!) In fact, I don't even play the guitar. But I do know what it's like to be an artist, to walk that delicate line between hope and uncertainty. On the one hand, you have to believe more than anything that you've got what it takes to make it. On the other, you can't help but be aware of how precarious a career like this can be, how the bottom could drop out at any moment. Which is exactly what has happened to Greta when we meet her.

This story began because I wanted to write about someone living an unconventional life—a life that she's fiercely and stubbornly proud of—and explore what happens when she winds up on a cruise ship with the one person in the world who has always doubted her. This is a book with many love stories, and if the main one is Greta and her music, and the more conventional one is between Greta and the charmingly nerdy professor she meets on the ship, then the heartbeat underneath it all is the relationship between Greta and her dad, which can be thorny and frustrating and maddening. But also completely full of love.

Of course, if there's a fourth love story, it has to do with Alaska, where this story is set. I was lucky enough to go on a family cruise there in high school, and the stark beauty of the scenery stuck with me. When I sat down to write this book, I figured I could get by on memory and YouTube videos of other people's vacations (thanks, Anderson family!), but it soon became clear that to really capture the feel of it, I'd need to go again myself. And so I did. I promise I didn't write this book just as an excuse to return to Alaska, but it turned out to be a truly wonderful perk. There's no place like it, and during a time when travel isn't always as easy it as it used to be, I hope this story brings a little piece of the Alaskan wilderness to you too.

This book is a very special one for me. It's my tenth novel, but my first one for adults, so it feels like a debut in many ways, and I've never been prouder of anything I've written. I may not be a rock star, and we may not be in a packed music venue with all its energy and immediacy, but I think what happens between writers and readers is something even more profound, something quieter and more personal. So whether this is the first you've heard of me, or you've grown up along with my books, I'm endlessly grateful to you for choosing to spend time with Greta. It means the world.

Happy reading – and happy travels!

Cheers,

Jennifer E. Smith

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you think about Greta as a character? Did you connect with her? How did she change throughout the novel?
2. *The Unsinkable Greta James* takes place over the course of a week. How does that timeline impact the pacing of the story?
3. Early in the novel, Jennifer E. Smith writes, “It’s what’s driven her all these years, the feat of all that—of getting stuck, of standing still, of being ordinary.” Have you ever related to this feeling?
4. Discuss the relationship between Greta and her father and how it changed by the end of the novel.
5. *The Unsinkable Greta James* is about grief, dreams, forgiveness, family, and self-discovery. Which theme resonated the most with you? Were there other themes you noticed?
6. What did you think about Ben and his relationship with Greta? What purpose did their romance show? How did it show a different side of this prickly protagonist?
7. Why do you think the author wrote Greta as a musician? What role did music play in the novel?
8. Ben, our favorite *Call of the Wild* scholar, shared a Jack London quote with Greta. “The proper function of a man is to live, not to exist.” What do you think this means? Do you agree?
9. If you could play the unsinkable soundtrack to your life, what would you hear? Are there any song lyrics that really speak to you?
10. Discuss the setting of the novel. Why do you think the author placed her characters on a cruise ship? What did the Alaskan backdrop bring to the story?
11. Towards the end of the book Greta wonders about real life and living a dream. She considers whether those things can coexist or if you have to trade one for the other. What do you think?
12. What did you think of the ending of the book? Were you satisfied? Did it leave you wanting more?

PLAYLIST

FAST SLOW DISCO – ST. VINCENT

ALASKA – MAGGIE ROGERS

MODERN GIRL – SLEATER-KINNEY

WONDERWALL – OASIS

YOU LEARN – ALANIS MORRISSETTE

WHEN I COME AROUND – GREEN DAY

LOVED YOU A LITTLE – CHARLOTTE SANDS

THIS MUST BE THE PLACE – TALKING HEADS

CARRIED ME WITH YOU – BRANDI CARLILE

KARMA POLICE – RADIOHEAD

ANYTHING COULD HAPPEN – ELLIE GOULDING

A BETTER SON/DAUGHTER – RILO KILEY

PURPLE RAIN – PRINCE

HEAD UNDERWATER – JENNY LEWIS

GLASS, CONCRETE & STONE – DAVID BYRNE

STAR WITNESS – NEKO CASE

PIECE OF MY HEART – JANIS JOPLIN

MANHATTAN – CAT POWER

WILD HORSES – THE ROLLING STONES

1234 – FEIST

NEW YORK – ST. VINCENT

DOG DAYS ARE OVER – FLORENCE + THE MACHINE

JENNIFER E. SMITH'S ALASKA PHOTO ALBUM

