BOOK CLUB KIT

MONTEREY BAY

LINDSAY HATTON

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Hello readers,

I’m so happy you’ve chosen *Monterey Bay* for your book club.

Monterey, California is a special place for many people. Its coastline is among the most famous in the world. Its aquarium welcomes nearly two million visitors every year. It has served as a muse for countless writers, artists, philosophers, and scientists, some of whom are characters in my book.

I called Monterey home for the first twenty-one years of my life. During high school and college, I worked summers at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. I became well versed in the region’s colorful history and in the natural history of the bay. But to me, there was always something about my hometown that history alone couldn’t quite explain. There seemed to be an imagined tale of heartbeat and ambition just below the factual surface: an alternate founding legend that captured how it felt to stand knee-deep in a tank full of hungry bat rays, to watch the morning fog roll in, to be alone on Cannery Row at midnight and hear the whispers of ghosts.

I like to think of Margot Fiske, the protagonist in *Monterey Bay*, as one of these ghosts. Unlike John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts, she never actually existed. She is an invented composite of girls and women I’ve read about and known, and of girls and women I could have been. Through her, there are many questions I hope to explore. What is the price of inappropriate desire and its expression? Is it possible to both escape and embrace a family legacy? Do people belong to places, or do places belong to people? Is a true story the same as a story that tells the truth? When, if ever, is captivity preferable to freedom?

For those of you who have spent time in Monterey, I hope the book recalls your best memories of this enigmatic and beloved town. I also hope it gives you the opportunity to reconsider what makes it so extraordinary. And for those of you who have never been: welcome! I hope you enjoy your visit.

*Lindsay Hatton*
A CONVERSATION WITH LINDSAY HATTON

You were born and raised in Monterey; you now live in Boston. Why did you choose to return to your hometown as the setting for your book?

I was just following standard debut novel protocol, I think! Seriously, though, it was mostly because of homesickness. Joan Didion puts it beautifully in *Where I Was From*. She admits to writing her first book with “the inchoate intent…to return me to a California I wished had been there to keep me.” I feel the same way.

The novel interweaves two stages in Margot’s life, beginning when she is fifteen years old in 1940, and then later in her life in 1998. What made you want to tell her story in this way?

From the earliest drafts of the novel (which were written an embarrassingly long time ago), I envisioned the book’s structure as being highly dependent on pivotal interludes of narrative density. In other words, I wanted to do what an aquarium does: isolate a situation of particular interest and mine it for its full aesthetic and emotional potential. 1940 and 1998 are when Margot experiences two of her life’s most definitive moments, so it seemed both natural and intriguing to see what would happen if they were placed in chronological juxtaposition.

How did you decide to represent John Steinbeck? Did you research his life or revisit his novels?

I re-read his novels with an eye toward tone and theme, and I also consulted biographies for a sense of his personal timeline. The most helpful material, however, were his journals and letters. They provided a direct conduit to his thoughts, preoccupations, and ways of speaking, and were therefore phenomenally helpful when creating his character and figuring out how he’d respond to Margot’s disruptive arrival.

Many readers of Steinbeck recognize Ed Ricketts as “Doc” from *Cannery Row*. Why did you choose to feature him in your novel? Did Steinbeck’s characterization of Doc influence the Ed Ricketts character you created?

Ed Ricketts was well known to me long before I read *Cannery Row*, if you can believe it! He’s a cult figure within Monterey’s scientific community and, since his lab still stands just a few doors down from the aquarium, his legacy pervades the landscape. I’m very fond of the “Doc” Steinbeck created, but he’s not the Ricketts in my novel. Because of their unusually close friendship, I think Steinbeck indulged and excused Ricketts’s darker characteristics. I definitely took a different, and less forgiving, approach.

You worked at the aquarium throughout your high school years. What did you do there? What was the most interesting/surprising thing you learned?

I did a little bit of everything at the aquarium. I worked behind-the-scenes cleaning the tanks and feeding the fish. I went on collecting trips. I helped with exhibit fabrication. I also wrote and performed in some really goofy visitor programs. (The intern in the sea otter costume in Chapter 8? That’s me!)

One of the most surprising things I learned when I was working there had nothing to do with the animals on display; it had to do with the people who cared for them. As I mention in the novel, the aquarists are a particularly dedicated bunch. They believe whole-heartedly in the aquarium’s
mission and go about their work with incredible wisdom and precision. As a result, there's an almost devotional quality to the spaces behind the tanks, which was something I tried very hard to honor in my book.

**It’s fair to say Margot goes through a lot in her early years, but we see her pick herself up time and again and charge ahead. She’s an incredibly resilient character. Are there female protagonists in literature whom you particularly admire? Did any of them influence Margot?** Cathy Ames (aka Kathy Trask, Kate Albey, etc.) in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. This might sound odd because she is unquestionably the book's arch villain and perhaps the most noxious woman in literary history. I, however, adore her. She is relentless and bizarre and supremely entertaining; the novel wouldn’t be half as good without her. Additionally, I think the manner in which Steinbeck portrays her can be seen as evidence of a larger cultural fascination and discomfort with female power, especially of the sexual variety, which is an issue Margot certainly encounters in her relationships with the men in her life.

**Through Margot’s and Ricketts’s eyes, we meet a fascinating array of sea creatures—they practically become characters of their own. It’s clear you’re well-acquainted with marine life. Is this something you’ve studied?** I could never be anything other than a writer; I’ve tried and failed on several occasions. However, in a parallel universe somewhere, I’m nearly certain there's a version of me standing in a tide pool and recording limpet density. I haven't studied marine biology in an advanced academic setting, but I consider myself an amateur enthusiast. I read about the ocean almost every day, and I dream about it almost every night.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. We meet and get to know Margot at ages 15 and 73. She is a complicated heroine who is at times both very hardheaded and very fragile. How do you think Margot changes over time? How are her strengths and weaknesses presented throughout the novel?

2. Arthur frequently finds himself being used by forces bigger than himself. First the canneries, then by Ricketts, and finally by Margot herself. Does he know he’s being used? Does he care?

3. Margot does everything she can to live up to Anders expectations of her, but in the end she refutes his claim of being his life’s work by saying, “No I wasn’t. I was the thing that happened in spite of it.” How did your parents influence your childhood? What do you make of it today?

4. Why do you think Steinbeck doesn’t like Margot?

5. At one point, Steinbeck says of Ricketts, “Sure, you’ll know the ocean inside and out, but people will still be a mystery, and there’s nothing in this world more tragic than that.” Do you agree? How does this apply to Steinbeck and Ricketts’s friendship?

6. As a 15-year-old, Margot thinks she and Ricketts are in a relationship. How did you react to their affair? How you think Margot reflects on the affair as she gets older?

7. Margot leaves her father and runs to Manila vowing to never put pencil to paper and create anything again. Do you think she keeps this promise to herself? How does the Aquarium factor into this vow?

8. The landscape and soul of Monterey Bay always seem to be undergoing change, whether it’s the 1940s or 1980s. How do the characters relate to these changes? Discuss a time when you’ve felt your home changing and how that affected you.

9. When Margot first meets Tino, she doesn’t like him. How does their relationship evolve over time? What do you think influenced these changes?

10. At the end of the story the engine that kills Ricketts ends up at a playground for children with kids climbing all over it. What does this say about the length of the human memory and how we think about death?
RECOMMENDED READING

ON STEINBECK AND RICKETTS:

EAST OF EDEN by John Steinbeck

Oprah's Book Club was right. This novel is a powerhouse of plot and character and theme. One of the things I like about Steinbeck is the thing he's often criticized for: his sentimentality. He was a writer who felt big and wrote big and you can see this bigness all over the page. When you're reading, pay attention to the villain. Head wound, photographs in the brothel. Perhaps more than a passing similarity to one Margot Fiske?

THE LOG FROM THE SEA OF CORTEZ by John Steinbeck (and Ed Ricketts)

A little bit of controversy surrounds this one. Steinbeck was vehement that Ricketts receive equal credit for his contributions to this unusual travel log, but these wishes were never really honored. Maybe that's the reason for the book's startling appendix: an essay in which Steinbeck eulogizes Ricketts following the latter's odd and untimely death.

RENAISSANCE MAN OF CANNERY ROW: THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF ED RICKETTS edited by Katharine A. Rodger

In case I didn't make it abundantly clear in my novel, Ed Ricketts was one hell of a charmer. It's impossible to read these letters and not fall just a little bit in love with him, even when he's clearly writing under the influence!

ON THE FISH:

A FASCINATION FOR FISH: ADVENTURES OF AN UNDERWATER PIONEER by David C. Powell

A comprehensive, entertaining, and amicable behind-the-scenes look at what it takes to keep fish in tanks. Powell is the brain behind some of the Monterey Bay Aquarium's most celebrated exhibits, and he recounts their creation beautifully.

OCTOPUS AND SQUID: THE SOFT INTELLIGENCE by Jacque-Yves Cousteau and Philippe Diolé

There are lots of good books about cephalopods out there, but there's something about Cousteau's whole je ne sais quoi that really captures the essence of these magical creatures.

BETWEEN PACIFIC TIDES by Edward Flanders Ricketts

Ricketts's magnum opus. It's no exaggeration to say that he literally wrote the book on tide pool ecology. In addition to being groundbreaking and comprehensive, it's sprinkled here and there with his trademark wit, including a passage in which he tries and fails to eat a gumboot chiton.

ON MONTEREY:

STORIED LAND: COMMUNITY AND MEMORY IN MONTEREY BAY by John Walton

The history of Monterey, like all histories, is determined by point of view. This book does a fine job showing just how many points of view have been vying for dominance over the town's famous legacy.

SHAPING THE SHORELINE: FISHERIES AND TOURISM ON THE MONTEREY COAST by Connie Y. Chiang

A thought-provoking examination of the dualities of life in Monterey: industry versus recreation, labor versus leisure, humanity versus nature. This book complicated my understanding of my hometown, and for that I'm grateful.


Over the past several decades, Monterey Bay has been restored from a industrial wasteland to one of the world healthiest marine ecosystems. This book tells the triumphant and suspenseful tale.
The bust of Ricketts that marks the site of the train collision that killed him. Someone always puts a flower in his hand.

The railroad crossing where Ricketts’s was killed at the intersection of Cannery Row and Drake Avenue.

The train that, according to my book, did the damage.
An old steel storage cylinder: one of the last remaining relics from the cannery days.

The aquarium’s entrance.

The front door of Ricketts’s lab.

The back lot of Ricketts’s lab.