

Pearce Oysters



Book Club Kit

Dear Reader,

Of all the books you could be holding right now, I'm honored that you're holding mine.

This novel is as personal as it gets for me, though nearly every cell in my body has turned over since I started it nine years ago. This is a story of a family, the Pearces. The Pearces have owned an oyster farm in Louisiana so long that it started off in a canoe.

I've always wanted to tell a story that knits together a family and the environment, politics and community, with humor and love. (I devoured Steinbeck novels in college.) But telling such a large story meant some failed attempts. It meant learning to tell a story from multiple points of view and learning to write about the environment. In an early draft of this novel, the oysters talked, I'm afraid—a kind of Greek chorus.

My own story with the novel's subject reaches back to 2010. I was living in New Orleans and waiting tables in a French Quarter restaurant with a rat problem, when an explosion on an oil rig off the Louisiana coast precipitated the largest accidental oil spill in world history.

I was twenty-three years old then and part of a small activist community that protested the company responsible for the spill—and how it handled the spill. (You'll recognize one scene of our well-meaning efforts portrayed in the novel.) But we felt, as everyone did, helpless to do much but wait for it to be over.


That summer, I read a profile in a weekly paper about an oyster farm that was closing down. The oyster farmer explained the threat of the spill from his perspective—one that could put him out of business for years. An oiled oyster reef was not just a season's loss, but the loss of several years because it can take four years for an oyster to reach market size.

I kept thinking about that profile, even after the oil spill and its effects faded from national headlines. In 2015, I received a grant to record the oral histories of oyster farmers about their lives and how they'd been affected by the oil spill. I interviewed farmers from across Louisiana. They opened their homes to me, invited me for dinner; some invited me out on their boats to see the reefs. On one trip, our boat grounded in the marsh of a Native American burial mound and the captain assured me that we'd be free once the tide came in—four hours later. What those men and women taught me about the ecosystem and the industry—and the oyster—became the foundation of this novel.

I learned that oyster reefs protect the coast from storms by breaking the assault of waves. That every year before shrimp season, a Catholic priest blesses the boats with holy water. That you lean over an oyster as you eat it. That when you eat an oyster, the flavor of it, what you're tasting, is the environment where it lived, the plankton it ate, the minerals in that water. The French call this *merroir*. Or, as the oyster farmer in my novel says, "the whole point of an oyster is where it's from."

In more than one sense, I became a different person while writing this novel, and it is a great privilege to be able to share it with you now.

Thank you for reading for it.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jaslyn Lakacs".

Discussion Questions



1. *Pearce Oysters* is a heavily researched, fictionalized account of real-life events. In what ways did living through the events alongside the characters impact your understanding of the 2010 Oil Spill?
2. Benny and Jordan have a difficult relationship due to their conflicting interests and beliefs. Who did you find yourself relating to most?
3. May is still reeling from the loss of her husband at the start of the novel, and we see her open up and welcome the idea of being a “liberated woman,” a concept she had previously balked at. Where do you think this shift comes from?
4. What do you think of Kiki’s version of advocacy? Is it performative? Does it feel less resonant than Jordan and Benny’s forms of protest? Why or why not?
5. Jordan seems to have the most nuanced perspective on the spill, though he is arguably the character who will feel its effects the most. How do his politics affect his views on the situation?
6. What do you make of Jordan’s relationship with Cyndi? Did their connection surprise you?
7. May feels immediately judged by Kiki upon meeting her, and after their dinner, she begins getting rid of decor pieces in her home that she feels might be a source of criticism. How do these two women relate to each other? How are they different? How are they the same?

Discussion Questions



8. Why do you think Jordan diminished Benny's role when speaking to the NPR reporter? Was it wise to be honest at that moment? Why do you think they had originally planned to portray a united family business front?

9. Did this book change your perspective on the 2010 Oil Spill? In what ways?

10. How do you feel about Doc and May's relationship in the beginning? Do you like them together? Why or why not?

11. Benny's sexuality and his discomfort with expressing it back home are touched on throughout the novel. Explore his relationship with Alejandro and the attraction, shame, intimacy, and secrecy in their interactions.

12. What do you think the overall message of the novel is?

13. In many ways, this novel is, at its core, about family relationships, legacy, and the sweeping effects of environmental disasters. Explore the ways in which these themes overlap.

14. Media and PR spin is a recurring theme throughout this novel. How do the fishermen and oyster farmers use this to their advantage? What about those in the oil industry?

15. Do the male characters in *Pearce Oysters* value the women in their lives? Think about Benny, Jordan, and Doc, and their relationships with Kiki, Cyndi, and May.



Book Club

Theme

Pearce Oysters is a stunning work of eco-fiction because it isn't just about our environment—and how we must protect it—but also about the connections between environment, family, culture, and community. These thematic intersections drive the novel and can be incorporated into your *Pearce Oysters* book club!

A *Pearce Oysters* book club is an amazing way to combine environmentalism and community. In this kit, you'll find a list of actions you can take to protect our oceans. You can begin to do some of those things as you prepare for your meeting:

- **Reduce vehicle pollution:** Wherever you are meeting, consider carpooling with other members of your book club.
- **Reduce waste:** Are you having snacks at your book club? Consider what food items you already have (that might end up going to waste) and try to incorporate them into a creative recipe.
- **Use less energy:** If it's nice weather, save some light usage and have your book club outside.

Q&A with Joselyn Takacs

What inspired you to write a family story centered around the 2010 Oil Spill?

At the time of the oil spill, I was living in New Orleans. That summer, I remember reading a profile in a local weekly about an oyster farmer whose company was closing down as oil was making its way into Louisiana estuaries. I don't think many of us believed that oil would make its way to the coast when we first heard of the explosion on the offshore oil rig.

At the time, I was waiting tables at a French Quarter restaurant that served the Louisiana classics—jambalaya, gumbo, shrimp creole—but I hardly knew a thing about the commercial fisheries—let alone that Louisiana leads the nation in oyster production. So that article was my first introduction to the oyster industry and to the vulnerability of its oyster reefs. Because an oyster can take two to three years to reach market size, the farmer said, the oil spill was poised to devastate the oyster farm for many years.

I kept thinking about that profile as the years went on, and I followed the news of the spill and its effects on the environment. Eventually, when I realized I wanted to write a novel about a family-run oyster company, I knew I'd have my work cut out for me in terms of research. In 2015, I received a grant to record the oral histories of oyster farmers and fishermen who'd been affected by the oil spill. Those interviews were invaluable to me in terms of understanding the spill, and they became the foundation of the novel.



What do you hope that readers take away from *Pearce Oysters*?

I hope readers will connect with the Pearce family—that they can relate to or at least recognize these characters enough to root for them. In the process, I hope they learn a bit about Louisiana, the ecosystem, and the oyster.

What were your biggest challenges writing this novel?

I began writing this novel in 2015, so nine years ago. Back then, I didn't know when the novel began or whose story it was. I always knew I wanted to tell a family's story, but since it takes place during the 2010 Oil Spill, I wondered if I needed to begin on the oil rig that caught fire—to deliver a complete vision of the disaster—and emphasize how it connected so many unsuspecting lives. After months of reading and writing about oil rigs (they have gyms on them, you know, movie theatres even) and the cause of the explosion itself (extraordinarily complex), I eventually threw away those pages. In the end, it wasn't emotionally relevant to the Pearce family's story, and it was probably so far removed from my own experience it may not have been compelling. Throughout the years, I've fallen into various research traps. So much so that my dissertation adviser told me that I couldn't sink any more time into research as I was writing that first draft. She sensed, quite rightly, that research was a form of anxiety and procrastination for me. Her admonition freed me up to produce more pages, and I was grateful to her for it.

Q&A (continued)

Environmental disaster is obviously a major theme throughout the novel, as are the ways in which humans are to blame, and the ways in which humans are impacted. What about these dynamics interested you most?

I'm interested in how multifaceted these events are. The 2010 Oil Spill was impossibly horrendous—far greater in magnitude than anyone, including the oil company, was prepared for. The more I read about the spill, the more there was to unpack. There's the public relations aspect—how facts (and sometimes disinformation) are shared with the public. The fallibility of a large corporation. The relative powerlessness of the regulatory bodies. The existential horror of toxic exposure. The impossibility of cleaning up the spill. The public discussion about our reliance on oil.

So by telling the story of a family that depends on the ecosystem, I could explore all of that but also what's dearest to me—how all life is connected.

The members of the Pearce family we follow throughout the novel are all flawed in their own ways, and are not always the most likable—why did you choose to write them in this way?

I think that's true, and it stems from both what I know about people and the writing I admire most. I read for entertainment like anyone else, but reading fiction is a kind of emotional education. When we read, we live in other bodies and commit other peoples' grievous mistakes and learn something from the experience. Nice, well-behaved characters don't make for very good reading, for one thing, because they don't move the plot along. But I also feel the thrill of recognition when meeting messy characters. For writing to ring true to me, it will always feature complicated people falling short at times—acting selfishly, blindly, brashly. And who could throw stones at that? Everyone I know, even the ones I love most, could be guilty of the same. I certainly recognize that fallibility in myself. We all do our best most of the time and sorely miss the mark, and we're all still deserving of grace.

May, Cyndi, and Kiki each embody very different forms of womanhood. What were you thinking about as you were writing these characters?

I so agree. They do embody very different forms of womanhood, but that was less of a choice on my part than it was a discovery. When I invent characters, I think primarily about their upbringing and circumstances, and that informs the way they understand themselves and behave as women. So there are reasons, for instance, that May is so accommodating; Kiki is self-assured; and Cyndi is brassy.

Which character was the easiest to write? Which one was the most challenging? Why?

May's sections were the easiest to write. They came out like a song. Her voice felt very natural to me. Jordan's sections, on the other hand, were a challenge throughout since his character is the furthest from my own perspective, so it's particularly gratifying to hear when people connect with his sections. They feel hard-won.

Benny and Jordan's relationship is perhaps the most dynamic in the novel, as we watch them find ways to connect despite the vast differences in their values and priorities. What did you find most compelling about their relationship?

I find it fascinating how different siblings can be despite growing up in the same pressure cooker. Though I wouldn't say this is the most compelling aspect of the relationship, it interests me how siblings arrive at opposing ends of the political spectrum. In some ways, I think the brothers represent an argument I have with myself about what matters and why.

But on a more personal level, I think the brothers end up in the same house at a time in their lives when they can get to know one another, and even like one another.

When we read, we live in other bodies and commit other peoples' grievous mistakes and learn something from the experience.

Q&A (continued)

It's clear that you did a lot of research while writing this novel. What were some pieces of information you wish you had been able to include? Did any of your research take you by surprise?

More than I can say, really. There was so much. Writing a novel is just giving a glimpse of a life through a peephole. The art is in how much you can move that glimpse to an intimate look.

One little delight about the oyster comes to mind. In the larval stage, an oyster can actually swim, and it has a tiny foot. The oyster uses this tiny foot to feel for good ground to settle on—where it will spend the rest of its life. Ideally, this happens on an oyster reef since the presence of a reef indicates a good environment for growth. At this early stage, the oyster is called a pediveliger. I just like the image of it—the oyster foot. But passages about oyster reproduction did not make it to my first draft and for good reason.

What tools did you use in your research? What did you find most helpful?

There was great reporting about the oil spill, but no source was more useful for my purposes than the oral histories of Louisianans. Oral histories offer the felt experience of living through an event, but they're also true to life—varied and contradictory. As a fiction writer, the varied accounts of the spill underscored for me the importance of point of view, and I tried to lean into that as I was writing—the public briefing at the gym and the crowd's reaction is one example.

Can you speak a little to your writing process? Do you follow a routine? Do you tend to write at specific times of day? Is it more sporadic than that?

It has changed over the years depending on what's happening in my life. The ideal writing circumstance for me, and when I've produced the most work, has been at artist residencies—where I can live like a hermit with an endless supply of coffee and toast—and I can take long walks. At home, I usually work in two-hour bursts with an internet blocker on. I'm usually at my best in the morning.

What books have you been reading recently? What books are you looking forward to?

I discovered Tessa Hadley's work last year, and it was a revelation. Finding a new author, for me, feels a bit like falling in love. I'm on my third Hadley book of the year now. Hadley's short story collection, *After the Funeral*, came out last year, and I recommend it wholeheartedly.

Do you have any writing advice for aspiring authors?

I think my unconscious mind is far better at solving problems than my conscious mind is. I rely on timed freewriting sessions to break through periods of paralysis because I know I'm thinking about solving problems in my work even when I'm staring into my laptop, puzzling over the next scene. Freewriting has a way of letting those unconscious thoughts bubble up to the surface.

If you're stuck on something in your work, and you're avoiding it, a regular freewriting practice can be a means of reaping the benefits of all the thinking you're not aware you're doing. It also relieves some of the pressure of writing sessions.

Are you working on anything new?

I'm trying to write a screenplay at the moment. It's a palate cleanser after working for so many years on a novel.

**Finding a new author,
for me, feels a bit like
falling in love.**

Jordan

Saltine + Tabasco (this is also Joselyn's favorite way to eat an oyster!)

This simple, no-frills order is exactly how Jordan Pearce likes his oysters. The spicy kick of hot sauce balances the briny flavor of the oyster for a delicious bite. For a drink, pair with a beer. Stouts are a popular oyster pairing because of their rich, dark flavor that compliments the salty oyster.

Benny

Pesto + Lemon Juice

This rich and striking choice is a bit eclectic, but very tasty! A small amount of pesto goes a long way and compliments the oyster without masking the natural flavor. For a drink, pair with a refreshing gin cocktail, as spirits tend to intensify the natural flavor of oysters.

Joselyn Takacs crafts a cast of deeply sympathetic characters through the Pearce family. There's Jordan, the reluctant head of the family's oyster business; May, his distressed, widowed mother; and Benny, the beatnik musician brother who returns from New Orleans to help with the crisis. Like any family, their differences and unique traits are what balance them.

Balance is also the key element to oyster pairings! Here are our character oyster pairings. Which character do you share a palate with?

May

Mignonette Sauce

Classic and essential, this restaurant-favorite enhances the natural flavor of the oyster. For a drink, pair it with a bright, acidic white wine like Muscadet, Albariño, Pinot Gris, or Sauvignon Blanc.

If you're looking for a heartier meal, check out [Al's Oyster Spaghetti recipe!](#)

Al's Oyster Spaghetti

Recipe

Ingredients:

1 pint of fresh oysters (don't wash)
Optional: 1/2 cup oyster liquor from the
pint (If you skip this, you may want to
increase the milk.)
4 Tbsp. butter
2 Tbsp. olive oil
1 large shallot, minced
5-6 cloves garlic, minced
3/4 cup dry white wine
2 Tsp. thyme
2 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
3 Tbsp. milk
1/2 cup parsley, chopped
1/2 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese
and more for serving
Tony Chachere's Creole seasoning
Salt and pepper to taste



Instructions:

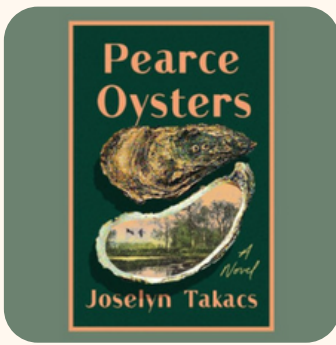
1. Melt butter and olive oil together in a large skillet.
2. Once butter is bubbling, add shallots and garlic. Sauté for a few minutes on medium-low.
3. Boil water for spaghetti. Cook as you normally would and then toss with a little olive oil when it's ready.
4. Once shallot is translucent, add parsley and $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt to sauce. Cook for one minute.
5. Add flour until sauce thickens and stir often. This should take just a minute. Then add in white wine.
6. Turn up the heat to medium. Add milk and thyme. Stir occasionally as you cook for two minutes.
7. Add oysters. You'll want to cook these for four to five minutes on medium. The oysters will become firm and opaque, and the edges of the oysters will turn up slightly.
8. Once the oysters have cooked, add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup parmesan cheese to the sauce.
9. Lastly, add a shake of Tony Chachere's Creole seasoning.
10. Taste sauce and add salt and pepper to taste.
11. Plate oyster spaghetti and add more cheese to taste.



HOW YOU CAN HELP OUR OCEANS

- 1. Conserve water:** Use less water so excess runoff and wastewater will not flow into the ocean.
- 2. Reduce pollutants:** Choose nontoxic chemicals and dispose of herbicides, pesticides, and cleaning products properly.
- 3. Reduce waste:** Cut down on what you throw away.
- 4. Shop wisely:** Choose sustainable seafood. Buy less plastic and bring a reusable bag.
- 5. Reduce vehicle pollution:** Use fuel-efficient vehicles, carpool, or ride a bike.
- 6. Use less energy:** Choose energy-efficient light bulbs and don't overset your thermostat.
- 7. Volunteer:** Volunteer for cleanups at the beach and in your community. You can get involved in protecting your watershed too!

[Click to learn more](#)



Playlist

PEARCE OYSTERS

Inspired by the lush and evocative New Orleans setting in Joselyn Takacs' debut novel, PEARCE OYSTERS.



Zibby Books Publishing • 13 songs, 46 min



Oh Louisiana Chuck Berry



Iko Iko The Dixie Cups



Tipitina Professor Longhair



None of My Jelly Roll Sweet Emma Barrett



Backwater Blues Bessie Smith



Big Chief Professor Longhair



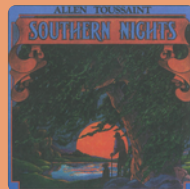
Basin Street Blues Louis Armstrong & His Hot Five



Louisiana 1927 Randy Newman



Down by the Riverside Papa Celestin



Southern Nights Allen Toussaint



House of The Rising Sun The Animals



St. James Infirmary Louis Armstrong



Mardi Gras in New Orleans Fats Domino