

A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF SEVEN MOVES



Aquamarine

Carol Anshaw

"A DELIGHT."—YMIES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT
"THE MOST ORIGINAL AMERICAN NOVEL
IN YEARS."—CHICAGO TRIBUNE

MARKER BOOKS

Reading Group Guide

Aquamarine

By Carol Anshaw

“*Aquamarine* is inventive in form, compact and lucid in language, and as all-American as Jell-O in its story.” —*Washington Post*

About the book:

At the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, 17-year-old Jesse Austin just loses the 100-meter freestyle to an Australian swimmer. That moment, suspended forever in the Olympic pool’s aquamarine, will haunt Jesse for the rest of her life—or, more properly, her lives.

With dazzling ingenuity, Carol Anshaw presents Jesse Austin in 1990, on the verge of turning forty, inhabiting three equally possible lives. Each of Jesse’s lives is an extension of choices made or not made after Mexico City; each contains the ache of past loss; each is defined by love lost and found. Jesse’s choices have brought her to marry, divorce, and remain single, to love men and women, to live in and away from her Missouri hometown. But Jesse is always haunted by the moment she can’t get back to—the moment hidden behind the aquamarine.

Aquamarine seamlessly weaves together three scenarios connected by the emotional ties that bind Jesse to the people in her past, who are also part of her haunted present: her eccentric godmother, her adoring retarded brother, her hard-hearted mother, and the elusive, seductive Australian, Marty Finch. *Aquamarine* plays exhilarating variations on the theme of lost love and examines the unlived lives running parallel to the one we have chosen.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Aquamarine* for every reader.

1. Jesse tells Alice Avery, “Sometimes I even think I’ve made up most of Marty Finch, invented this big betrayal.” Was Marty’s seduction and betrayal of Jesse in Mexico City in 1968 real or imagined?
2. In what ways do family, choice, and chance play a part in shaping each of Jesse’s lives?
3. As we read about Jesse’s three lives and her memories of Mexico City in each life, do the events and mysteries of 1968 become any clearer? Which flashbacks and memories in each life seem of greatest importance?
4. What are some of the incidents, real or imagined, that Jesse views as betrayals of love? How are these incidents linked to her past, beginning with her mother’s favoritism toward William?

5. How do recurring characters—such as Hallie, Jesse’s mother, and Laurel—change in relationship to Jesse in each of her lives? In what ways do Jesse’s actions affect them?
6. Each of Jesse’s lives includes a critical swimming scene. What are the symbolic implications of swimming in each life?
7. In what ways might the title *Aquamarine* be significant beyond its obvious connection to swimming?
8. The theme of vulnerability is important in each of Jesse’s lives and to the novel overall. How does vulnerability manifest itself in each of Jesse’s lives, and with what consequences for her and those she loves?
9. In what ways do the three Jesses, Hallie, and other characters defy social conventions. In what ways do they comply with conventions? What are the consequences?
10. In “Skywriter,” Jesse thinks of William’s retardation not “as something that is him, but rather something that wraps and suppresses him. A too heavy overcoat that muffles the real Willie inside.” Can each of Jesse’s lives be characterized in the same way? If so, do we ever know the real Jesse?
11. Anshaw writes of Jesse, in reference to her willingness to take on the prejudices of Venus Beach: “She enjoys shaking small minds and listening to the beads rattle around inside.” How does each Jesse “shake small minds,” and with what outcome for herself and others?
12. Jesse tells Hallie that “it seems like there was this short little span of time right after Mexico when I had to make all the crucial decisions in my life.” How do we view this in relation to Jesse’s possible lives as a married expectant mother, a lesbian, and a divorced mother of two?
13. Sitting in the Azure Grotto (in “Skywriter”), Jesse feels “her present pressing in on her. She needs to get away.” And at the end of “6s & 7s & 9s,” she thinks that “she needs to retreat for a while, from the present.” Have you experienced in a similar way “the present pressing in,” and if so, what were some of the strategies you used to handle it?
14. Jesse relates to Hallie as a surrogate mother. In what ways do people compensate for their estrangement from family members and find substitutes—for example, by creating family out of friends?
15. In “Skywriter,” Jesse says to Neal, “I worry I was my best self then, my best version of me. And I can never get back to her.” In which of her three lives do you think Jesse realizes her “best self”?

About the Author

Carol Anshaw was born in Detroit and has lived in Chicago for many years. Before *Aquamarine* and *Seven Moves* were published, she wrote restaurant reviews, articles on a variety of topics (including barbed wire), and young-adult vampire novels. And for seven years she was backup (to Roger Ebert) movie reviewer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Anshaw writes short stories and reviews books for newspapers and magazines nationwide. In 1990, she received the National Book Critics Circle Citation for Excellence in Reviewing.

Aquamarine appeared to excellent reviews in 1992. For this inventive, provocative novel she won the Chicago Public Library's Carl Sandburg Award and the Society of Midland Authors Book Award. In 1995 she received a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. The publication of *Seven Moves* in 1996, again to reviewers' acclaim, established Anshaw as a novelist of the first order.

While working on her next novel, Anshaw continues to write short stories (which have appeared in Houghton Mifflin's annual collection, *The Best American Short Stories* and elsewhere) and teaches in two graduate writing programs—at the Art Institute of Chicago and at Vermont College, from which she received her own degree in 1992.

A Conversation with Carol Anshaw

Q) How did you become a novelist in the first place?

A) My mother tells me I tried to write my first book when I was six, but didn't know enough words. I came to writing through reading. I'd go to the library, look for titles I liked, bring home these stacks of books. And since they were novels, that's what I wanted to write. I was really in a cave by myself during this time, through adolescence and into my 20s. I had little in the way of formal education, didn't know anyone who wrote fiction. I just kept reading and writing, teaching myself as I went along.

Q) What are you working on now?

A) I have the beginnings of a new novel in mind, also a short story titled "The Mystery of the Jungle Airstrip," which isn't a mystery and doesn't feature either a jungle or an airstrip.