

# A Readers' Guide to *Greetings from Cool Breezes*

## Discussion/Reflection Issues, Themes and Questions

- Part One: Jumping Off the Deep End
- Part Two: Sailing the U.S. Eastern Seaboard
- Part Three: Cruising the Cuban Cayos
- Part Four: Bahamas by Boat
- Part Five: Ship to Shore/Afterword

\*Please note: A glossary of sailing and Spanish terms appears on page 532.

The journey retold in *Greetings from Cool Breezes* is not only physical journey, but also personal and emotional. Buried beneath the apparent subject of a family's travels and adventures at sea are some deeper subjects. To borrow a sailing metaphor, here are some "jumping-off" points for discussion or reflection:

1. **Book structure.** The story of the family's year aboard is told in 35 chapters and 15 brief email missives. How do the pace and tense of the email segments differ from the regular chapters?
2. **Weather gods and weather windows.** *The kids and I felt mired in a misty drizzle, as dispirited as the weather* (p. 104). *The whistling of the wind did nothing to lift our moods* (p. 235). In Chapters 5, 8, 17, and 18, the weather figures almost as a character. *Schedules, commitments and social pressures govern life at home, but weather rules life on board.* Does weather affect urban life? *We can't direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.* Does this sailors' maxim apply to landlubber life?
3. **Transitions.** In this book, one of the biggest challenges facing the crew was adapting to marine life, becoming liveaboards. *We prairie dwellers were just learning to cope with dampness. ... We were gaining our sea legs* (p. 66, on Chesapeake Bay in October). *No longer fish out of water, flopping about the docks, yet not quite seasoned sailors, we'd become amphibious* (p. 202, in Cuba in January). *[W]e had become truly immersed in our world of wind and water and islands, where time and we could amble instead of rush. Still amphibious, we were nonetheless more tadpole than frog* (pp. 395-6, the Bahamas in April). Some of the crew (the children) adapted better to change than others (the author). What does the experience of transitions tell us about ourselves?
4. **Superstitious sailors.** The crew of *Cool Breezes* was surprised to discover that the modern sailing community still clung to some old sea dog superstitions, such as the aversion to re-naming a boat, and the dangers of setting out on a voyage on a Friday. Are superstitions more prevalent among sailors than landlubbers, and if so, why? What purpose do superstitions serve?
5. **Proverbial wisdom.** Related to superstitions are common sailors' proverbs such as "One hand for you, one hand for the boat" (page 55), and "Red skies at night, sailor's delight; red skies in the morning, sailors take warning" (page 67). What is the difference between these seafaring maxims and the superstitions described above?

6. **Living the dream.** *Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.* (Mark Twain, quoted on p. 3) The crew of *Cool Breezes* was described by fellow travellers as “audacious,” as “having guts.” In an interview with a magazine writer enroute, the author says: “*We had to overcome the fear of losing what we had – our so-called security – in order to realize [our more important goal]*” (page 204). In the opening chapter, the author describes the lesson taught by her father’s and Pat’s fathers premature deaths: *Our fathers taught us we couldn't afford to delay our dreams.* Yet, later in the book, Alex and Elaine, 80 and 78 years young, advise the crew that “*you needn't be young to fulfil your dream*” (p. 231). What are the constraints and considerations preventing us from pursuing our dreams?
7. **The reward is the journey** (Gandhi, quoted on page 124). Why was the route of *Cool Breezes* not more ambitious? (Pages 123-124, 150)
8. **The quest for self-sufficiency.** In a few places in the book, the metaphor of the catamaran as an island is presented (e.g. pages 70, 154). What is behind the aspiration to become more independent, to “drop out” of society, and why is there a sense of satisfaction in doing things from scratch?
9. **Cabin fever.** The flip side of the autonomy coin can be a sense of irritation with narrowness, of chafing within small confines. The author admits to this sentiment on pages 71, 114, 129, all of Chapter 17, and in Chapter 28. *What is a ship but a prison?* (Robert Burton, quoted on page 403). What antidotes to feeling marooned does the author discover?
10. **The anonymity of travel.** *What a sight we are ...! We don't care a whit; we know no one. Anonymity is one of travel's great advantages.* How does travel give license to re-invent oneself?
11. **Ineptitude and confidence.** *I read every book I could find about family adventures at sea,* the author confesses on pages 6-7, *[paying] close attention to the mother/wife figure in each story. [I] noticed that unlike me, most had a wealth of sailing experience.* Later, when her husband Pat flies home for ten days, the writer senses *an incredulous helplessness...: doesn't anyone realize how inept I am?* (page 31). Months later, despite her growing sense of competence, she finds her *smug self-appraisal is premature* (p. 279). Does adversity strengthen character, as the proverb teaches?
12. **Multi-tasking merry-go-round.** *Time was in short supply [that] spring...we were counting down toward ... our long-awaited boat trip. Disentangling ourselves from our hectic North American lifestyle was proving much more time-consuming than we expected...The tension from overdrive multi-tasking was palpable in my veins...my head [was] spinning with new chores to add to my never-ending, ever-scrolling to-do list* (page 12). Why do we allow ourselves to live in a stressful way? What can we do to avoid stress in our lives?
13. **Ship-to-shore transition.** Why was the crew’s shift to life on land described as “ragged”? (Pages 499-500)
14. **He that would go to sea for pleasure would go to hell for a pastime** (page 263). On page 158, the many metaphors of the main are described: *The ocean: ...a symbol of yearning or of escape from worldly chaos; the restless water a sign for human alienation or unresolved emotion. The*

*Protean sea personified: a harsh and unmerciful taskmaster, unrelenting and uncaring as the pounding surf; a seductress, sparkling and flirtatious; a roaring avenger with a tempestuous temperament, a monster to be feared* (page 158). The crew experienced stormy as well as placid waters. Having stowed away aboard *Cool Breezes* for a year, how would you characterize the sea?

15. **A sea change.** Why was the trip from the United States to Cuba a “sea change” for the crew of *Cool Breezes*? (Pages 175, 185, 187, 307)
16. **Changing attitudes.** The author was happy to pay \$30 for laundry in Puerto Vita, Cuba (page 292). Yet only a month earlier, in Varadero, she felt that \$18 was too much (page 191). Why?
17. **Moral dilemmas about prosperity and poverty.** In Cuba, Liam was asked by an authority figure to give away his water sandals (page 198). What would you have counselled your child, and why?
18. **Social hardship.** When asked in an interview what was the hardest part about sailing, Pat said, *Docking* (p. 205). In response to the same question, Ben answered, *Sharing a bed with my brother* (p. 248). The author’s greatest hardship was *[missing] the intensity of close relationships with other women ... I know any friendship I make ... will be fleeting, and that’s not enough* (page 205). Later, she writes, *I found myself more reclusive aboard than at home, where my established friendships lie, but Pat liked the more casual and transient marina social life* (page 233). She observes that it was more often Pat than herself that initiated social interaction, *a major role reversal from our social pattern back home* (p. 226). Later, a fellow cruiser named Betsy confesses that she is lonely: *too much togetherness with my husband and kids, and not enough social outlet with other women* (p. 393). Is this experience typical in travel situations?
19. **Charity.** Outside the village of Jaguey Grande, Cuba, the family encounters a friendly little girl and her mother, and gives them a car trunk full of material goods. *What a rush*, the author says. *That’s the most fun I’ve had in a long time* (page 208). Why is sharing such a joy?
20. **Aversion to spiritual openness.** In Chapter 16, a fellow sailor named Gary describes an encounter on the rough water with his guardian angel. *An uncomfortable silence followed. Spiritual openness is something to which we North Americans are unaccustomed*, the author observes (p. 225). Yet later, over drinks, the sailors *spin yarns of other mysteriously provident turns of event at sea* (page 225). Why in our culture do we feel vulnerable discussing spirituality?
21. **Perversely enjoying adversity.** *That the weather was serious was perversely reassuring... and perversely exciting*, the author finds. *The drama of a strong gale appealed to my pioneer spirit, in the same way a blizzard would back home. Yes, it was something to dread, and something to hate. It was also something to love to hate* (page 269). Later, in the middle of a summer squall, she *found the storm refreshing, even exhilarating, but not scary* (p. 450). Have you ever felt this same palpitation with danger?
22. **Food cravings.** Mealtimes became *the centrepiece of every day on the water* (page 275). Meara eloquently describes her chocolate craving: *When you take a bite of chocolate, it’s a whole new world* (p. 244). Yet in a few situations in their journey, it is not the luxuries, like chocolate,

but the basics, that the crew misses. Before the crew reaches Puerto Vita, Cuba, and again before landing in George Town, the Bahamas, the pantry aboard *Cool Breezes* grows barren of typical North American food stores. Liam claims to feeling *starved* (p. 275), and the children are stunned when their mother serves them rice with marmalade for breakfast. How does food affect attitude?

24. **Fading beauty.** At the Goombay Festival in the Bahamas, when both the author and her adolescent daughter Erin compete in the “shake-it-up” dancing contest, the author realizes that Erin is now a more attractive female than she (page 449). How does the author feel? What other mother-daughter tensions do they experience?

25. **Living in the moment.** As the journey unfolds, the author realizes she is learning a life lesson, beginning with the breast lump drama (page 84): how to live in the moment. Later, on a night watch, she reminds herself that *to live in the present is not optional but mandatory* (page 180). Despite her New Year’s resolution to *seize and savour* (page 143), she finds herself doing chores when she could be resting, i.e. resisting opportunities to dwell in the moment. At last, just as the boat trip ends, she discovers the elusive secret of being truly present (p. 488). Why is it so hard for North Americans to push away the past and set aside the future?

26. **Denial.** Living in the moment means not only surrendering to peace, but also facing the sometimes ugly present reality. When the author discovers a breast lump the very first night of the year’s journey, she descends into denial (pages 18-19, 30, 35, and 48). Why?