

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING

A NOVEL

DELIA OWENS

"Painfully beautiful . . . At once a murder mystery, a coming-of-age narrative, and a celebration of nature." —*THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

BOOK CLUB KIT

# QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

**1**

The North Carolina marsh where Kya lives has long been a sanctuary for outsiders. How does this setting shape the novel? How does growing up in this isolation affect Kya? In what ways does her status as an “outsider” change how others see her?

**2**

Why does Kya choose not to go back to school? Do you think she makes the wrong decision? How does Kya’s lack of formal education shape her vision of the world? Would her character be different if she had gone to school?

**3**

After Jodie and Pa leave Kya alone, she becomes close to Jumpin’ and Mabel. Why are these two adults drawn to Kya? What do they teach her about the world? Do you agree with Jumpin’s decision to protect Kya from social services (p. 110) and to encourage her to live alone in the marsh? Why or why not?

**4**

Why do you think Kya’s mother leaves in the beginning? Do you agree with her decision?

**5**

Kya often watches the other young people from town—she even nicknames them “Tallskinnyblonde, Ponytailfreckleface, Shortblackhair, Alwayswearspearls, and Roundchubbycheeks” (p. 80). What does Kya learn from observing these girls? Why do you think she keeps her watching secret? Do you agree with Kya’s secrecy?

**6**

How is womanhood explored throughout the novel? What does being a woman mean to Kya? How does she relate to the other women in Barkley Cove?

**7**

Discuss Kya’s relationship with Tate. How does Tate’s understanding of Kya change over time? Is Tate a good partner for Kya? Why or why not?

**8**

Tate’s father tells him that poems are important because “they make ya feel something” (p. 48). What does poetry mean to Tate? What does it mean to Kya? How does poetry help Kya throughout the novel?

**9**

On page 142, Kya watches the fireflies near her shack, and notices that the females can change their flashes to signal different things. What does this realization mean to Kya? What does it teach her about relationships? How does this lesson influence Kya’s decisions in the second half of the novel?

**10**

Discuss how Kya’s observations of nature shape her vision of the world. Do you think these lessons adequately prepare her for life in Barkley Cove? Do you think human society follows the same rules as the natural world? Should it? Why or why not?

**11**

Is Chase a different kind of man than Tate? How are they different? Is one man better? Do you think that their differences are biological or learned? How does Kya see each man?

**12**

In the end of the novel, Kya thinks “Most of what she knew, she’d learned from the wild. Nature had nurtured, tutored, and protected her when no one else would. If consequences resulted from her behaving differently, then they too were functions of life’s fundamental core” (p. 363). What does she mean? Do you agree with her philosophy? What do you think it means to be a good person? Do you think Kya is a good person? Why or why not?

**13**

Were you surprised by the verdict in the Chase’s murder trial? What about by the ending of the novel? Do you agree with Tate’s final decision? Why or why not?

# A CONVERSATION WITH DELIA OWENS

**What is your debut novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, about?**

*Where the Crawdads Sing* is a mystery, a love story, and a courtroom drama, but it is primarily about self-reliance, survival, and how isolation affects human behavior. Since our species is a social mammal, we have strong genetic tendencies to belong to a group of tightly bonded family and friends.

But what happens if a young girl—such as the novel's heroine, Kya—finds herself alone without a group? Of course, she feels lonely, threatened, insecure, and incompetent. Kya also behaves strangely, hiding behind trees when she sees others on the beach and avoiding the village. She ventures deeper into the wilds of the marsh, away from people, and in so doing begins to learn life's lessons directly from the natural world. This organic guidance, along with instinctual behaviors born from isolation, allow her to survive and protect herself. But much more than that, the confidence she gains from self-reliance permits her to soar with personal achievements beyond what she could imagine.

The novel explores how isolated individuals behave differently from normal and how much we change when rejected by others. On their own and excluded, humans often revert to behaviors that resemble those of early man, who survived eons ago on the savannas, or of wild creatures who still live “way out yonder where the crawdads sing.”

**In the novel, the North Carolina coastal marsh is itself almost a character. What made you choose this setting for your story?**

The coastal marsh of North Carolina, and Nature in general, is definitely a character of the novel. As one line of the story reads, “Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother.” After her family left her, Kya had no one but Nature to teach her about life, and there is no better teacher if we take the time to observe and listen to the wild. Kya honed her skills of harvesting mussels by watching the crows; she learned about dishonest signals from fireflies; she learned about loyalty and friends from the seagulls.

I chose the coastal marsh because I was somewhat familiar with it and knew other marshes and swamps of the southern states very well. When I was girl, I went canoe camping with my mother in the Okefenokee Swamp and other wild places.



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Other important reasons I chose the North Carolina marsh: Very little has been written about the historical population of people who lived within these untamed deltas and estuaries for more than four hundred years. These hardy souls were a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors and fugitives, and runaway and freed slaves. They ignored whatever laws—British, provincial, or American—ruled at the time, living off the land and scrapping like muskrats over their staked-out claims. Kya was born in the 1940s and probably would represent one of the last true marsh people, who lived for generations in their own nation of land and water.

(Note: I in no way want to forget the Native American populations who lived here for many more hundreds of years than anyone. But they are not the ones I write of in the novel. They were civilized and lived by a social order with strong families and laws.)

Another reason for choosing this marsh is that although it is a wild place, it is conceivable that Kya could have survived on her own. Collectable food was bountiful, as she shows us so well; temperatures are mild; hiding places abundant. And companions like Jumpin' and Mabel are not too far away.

**Tell us a little bit about the main character, Kya Clark. She is abandoned by her family at age ten, is rejected and scorned by the town locals, and faces obstacles that would be unimaginable to many of us today. How is she able not only to survive her circumstances but also build a satisfying life for herself?**

Kya is every little girl and one in a million. Kya is all of us. She represents what we can be when we have to be. I believe in her with all my heart. I believe all of us can do more than we can imagine when life requires it.

I was careful to write her survival in a realistic and believ-

able way. To me, the story had to be feasible. I purposely kept Pa around until Kya was ten, an age at which she was capable of gathering food and firewood, cooking, and boating in the marsh and sea. And of course, by then she could run or hide from anyone. So by the time she was truly alone, it was quite possible for her to survive on her own abilities.

**“When you can live in the wild—  
start a campfire in pouring  
rain and find your way in the dark—  
YOU TRULY BELIEVE  
IN YOURSELF.”**

And like all of us, she is intelligent and capable. The lives of the marsh creatures fascinated her, so she started collecting shells and feathers, learning Nature's lessons as she went. Since she had no friends or family, her only entertainment was to observe, collect, and record the wondrous fantiwild around her. And in so doing, she learned a tremendous amount about natural history, and her mind and talents developed. With those in hand, she was able to become a true naturalist and publish numerous reference books. Her collections of marsh life grew into the most complete and profound of its kind. A true and satisfying work of life—hers and the marsh's.

But let's not forget. Kya was also adventuresome, witty, and spunky. And full of love. Once she has the chance to be with others, some of her more hidden traits begin to shine.

**Kya grows up in solitude and isolation. Have your experiences as a researcher in remote areas of Africa informed your creation of this character?**

Much of my adult life—more than twenty-three years—was spent in either extreme or partial isolation. For one seven-year period, I lived in the Kalahari Desert with one other, and we were the only two people in an area the size of Ireland. (There were a few bands of roving Bushmen to the south, but so remote we never saw them.) In the Luangwa, I had my own camp in a very isolated spot, meaning that for twenty-three years I was isolated. Even now in Idaho I usually see other people only once or twice a week.

So yes, most definitely, my experiences created Kya. I know what it is like to be alone. To make friends with baboons and brown hyenas because there are no other girl friends around. I know how isolation can make you feel insecure and inadequate. What it is like to avoid people when you go to town because you don't belong.

However, I also know how your confidence soars when you learn how to track a cougar across sand or recognize a deer's alarm call. When you can live in the wild—start a campfire in pouring rain and find your way in the dark—you truly believe in yourself. You may still be lonely and feel awk-

ward around other people, but you can do much more than you ever thought possible.

All of this is Kya: Alone, unsure, awkward around people, but strong, capable, knowledgeable, and very spunky on her own. And in the end, the confidence she gains from self-reliance in nature gives her the strength to thrive in man's world.

**You spent decades researching two groups of mammals with strong matriarchal social structures. Are there similarities and differences in your observations of these animals and how humans behave?**

My research and many other studies have shown us that most social mammals, such as most primates, elephants, lions, hyenas—live in tightly bonded groups of females. Males emigrate from their natal group when they reach adolescence to search for other females to mate with. Otherwise, they would only have relatives with which to breed. But the females remain in their group for all of their lives, so that the pride, troop, or herd is made up of closely related or bonded females.

While observing lions, brown hyenas, and elephants in the wild, I became fascinated with how much their social behavior is like our own. Of course, these groups of females evolved because of the survival advantages, such as being the anti-predator. With forty baboon moms looking for leopards, there's a better chance the cat will be seen. And then you have forty moms alarm-barking and mobbing the leopard until it runs away. Another benefit is territorial defense. A group of bonded females within a troop can chase smaller groups from their range, keeping the best fruit trees for themselves.

But everything is not all hunky-dory in these groups. There is almost as much discord among the females as there is camaraderie. High-ranking female baboons fight over dominance to the point of inflicting wounds. They form cliques of strongly bonded individuals who harass lesser individuals and chase them from fruit trees. Lionesses feeding at a kill swat, snarl, and clobber one another's bloody faces. You would never guess these were the same pride mates that just hours earlier sprawled in an easy pile, licking one another's chins.

The troop, pride, pack, or herd evolved for the survival benefits, not the companionship. Sisterhood does occur, but is not the only driving force. So yes, they remind me a lot of us. Stay in the group for what it is worth, but watch your back. Still, the relationships between the females of human and other mammal groups are some of the most precious, loving,

**“[Female relationships] are some  
of the most PRECIOUS,  
LOVING, AND ENDURING  
RELATIONSHIPS.”**

**"When you can feel the planet beneath your toes  
and the trees moving about, you must  
listen with all your ears, and—I promise—  
you will hear the crawdads sing.**

## **IN FACT, IT WILL BE A CHORUS."**

and enduring relationships we have during our lives. And we suffer, as Kya did, if we are denied this honor.

### **What were the challenges of incorporating poetry into the story?**

It was great fun to incorporate poetry into the novel. The challenge was to reveal Kya's feelings without giving away the answer to the mystery.

### **The novel touches on race and environmental issues. Why was it important to you to include these aspects in the book?**

I think it would be very difficult to write a novel based in the 1950s and '60s about a young white woman who is befriended and protected by an older African American man and not touch on racism. Or to base a book in a threatened habitat such as the coastal marsh and not at least refer to its natural significance to the Earth. I strongly believe that art and literature are two of our best means of promoting social consciousness. However, I also believe that being a novelist is primarily being a storyteller, and that whatever messages we want to convey as a writer should not interfere with the story we tell. I tried very hard to let the story itself speak of the issues and to keep my personal opinions low-key.

### **You've coauthored three nonfiction books. Were there surprising differences or similarities to writing fiction?**

My nonfiction books followed strong story lines, with a beginning, middle, and end, so in that way the writing was similar to writing a novel. Also, the nonfiction books were character-driven—even if the main characters were lions, brown hyenas, or elephants. But of course with nonfiction there are the constraints of dates, times, and facts that must be accurate, yet these real-life events don't always flow within a good story line.

I loved the freedom of writing fiction. Of letting my imagination go as far as it would take me. You can always pull back, take a more conservative course. But why not soar for a while just to see what happens? A character can look, say, feel whatever works best for the tale. You can never do that with nonfiction.

To me writing fiction is like riding a horse through the gate and into the mountains. You take off and are never quite sure where you will end up.

### **You were educated in zoology and animal behavior, and the descriptions of the marsh in *Where the Crawdads Sing***

### **Sing seem to reflect a reverence and deep respect for even the smallest aspect of the natural world. What does a connection to nature mean for you, personally?**

Nature is and always will be my best friend. She is not constant or steady, but ever present. She is always there to soften a blow, to hold me, to teach me, to forgive me. She stays when others go. She makes me laugh and cry and teaches me everything I need to know. She is blue skies and rain. Mountain and valley. A hard rock to stand on and soft moss to lie on.

As I wrote in another book, "By nature, Nature gives." Every single thing we need comes from her, but we abuse her, starve her, forget her. She will be here long after we are gone, and we will once more be absorbed into her core. Hopefully this will remind us of what we forgot for a while—that we have been part of her all along.

### **Do crawdads really sing?**

Technically, scientifically, crawdads do not sing. But I've made a bit of a study of it myself. And I've found that first you must go—all by yourself—and set up a small camp in real wilderness. I'm speaking of a place far from any road or village. Not a park, but a remote and wild land filled with Earth's creatures. Just before dusk, you must walk deep into the woods and stand there exposed and totally alone as darkness descends around you. When you can feel the planet beneath your toes and the trees moving about, you must listen with all your ears, and—I promise—you will hear the crawdads sing. In fact, it will be a chorus.

### **Kya falls in love with two very different men. Did these distinctive characters have any meaning for the story?**

To me, Kya's first love, Tate, represents the sensitive, "evolved human male." He shares opera with his father and loves poetry. He is strong and manly, but is kind, intelligent, and caring. Of course, he makes mistakes, but tries to also make amends. He loves deeply and truly.

On the other hand, Chase is the raw, "unevolved" male who flashes his secondary sexual characteristics—such as his fancy ski boat—in order to attract one female after another. He is not very different from a buck deer in rut. He doesn't care who he hurts along the way as long as he can be with as many females as possible.

Kya, as many mammal females would, falls for both, but in the long run she makes the intelligent—evolved human—choice for the right one.

# KYA'S COOKBOOK

## PA'S HUSH PUPPIES

1 ½ cups self-rising cornmeal  
½ cup flour  
1 ½ cups sweet onions, chopped  
Buttermilk

Mix all ingredients with enough buttermilk to make a very thick batter. Let stand about 10 minutes. Drop batter from serving spoon into fresh hot oil. When they are floating and brown on the bottom, turn them. Cook until golden brown on all sides.

\*To improve on Pa's recipe use self-rising white cornmeal, Vidalia onions, and fry in fresh oil at 350 degrees.

## KYA'S MUSSELS AND GRITS

Large pot of mussels  
¾ cup grits  
3 cups water  
¾ teaspoon salt  
Chicken stock

Steam a large pot of mussels until tender about 7–8 minutes. Pour ¾ cup of grits in 3 cups of boiling water with ¾ teaspoon of salt. Cook on low for 6 minutes. Remove mussels from shells. Keep stock. Put grits in a large bowl and pour mussels and some stock over grits.

\*Kya ate mussels and grits because she had few options. I'm sure this recipe could be greatly improved by adding roasted garlic and white wine!

## PO MAN'S TURNIPS

Turnip greens  
Chicken stock  
Hot pepper sauce  
Salt

Drop turnip greens in pot of boiling chicken stock, reduce heat and cook for 30 minutes. Serve with hot pepper sauce and salt.

## MA'S BREAKFAST CORN FRITTERS

2 cups fresh corn kernels if available  
About 1 cup Martha White cornmeal  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1 fresh egg  
¾ cup water (or buttermilk if available)

Heat ¼ inch of oil in shallow skillet. Batter should be quite thin. Drop large spoon of batter into oil and cook until lacy edges begin to brown. Flip and cook until both sides are golden brown and lace is very crispy.  
\*Ma made it look easy, but to prevent the batter from sticking, the temperature must be adjusted. Also, to make about an inch of "lace" edges, the batter must be thin enough to spread into the oil. Ma served them hot with scrambled eggs, sliced ripe tomatoes, and cane syrup.

## OLD-FASHION CHICKEN PIE (KYA'S FAVORITE)

1 whole chicken  
Pastry for top and bottom of 9-inch pie dish  
5 carrots  
1 ½ cup fresh green peas  
2 small potatoes

**White sauce:**  
3 cups evaporated milk  
3 cups chicken stock  
6 tablespoons flour  
6 tablespoons butter  
1 teaspoon salt

Boil chicken, keep stock. Remove meat from the bones, cut into cubes. Make 6 cups of white sauce (melt butter in a pot, add flour and 1 teaspoon of salt, stir over low heat until smooth, increase heat to medium and slowly add 3 cups of warm stock and 3 cups of warm evaporated milk until sauce is thickened and smooth.). Boil and dice carrots. Cook fresh green peas. Boil and dice potatoes until tender. Add diced chicken and vegetables to sauce and pour into pie dish lined with pastry. Lay pastry on top and cut slices for steam. Bake until pastry is golden brown, approximately 1 hour.