

Reading Group Guide

Introduction

Similar to a Nicholas Sparks novel, but uniquely different, *Sand Dollar: A Story of Undying Love* is a thought-provoking, emotional read that, among other things, might have you yelling at the main characters at times. Unlike your typical fairytale romance, the characters in *Sand Dollar* have real life issues that must be dealt with. And all too often it's the ones we love the most who end up hurting us the most. A mixture of joy and heartache, this realistic portrayal of life is what sets *Sand Dollar* apart.

When the story opens, Noah, who's old and sick in a hospital bed, tells his story of undying love for his soul mate and one true love, Robin, who also happens to be the one who got away. The narrative is told from Noah's point of view with two timelines: when he's old, and when he's young. Eventually, these two timelines intersect with a surprising plot twist, moving forward with the most beautiful of endings — an ending you've just got to read for yourself!

Discussion Questions

1. **The One Who Got Away.** All of us could probably write a love story like *Sand Dollar*. That's because we've all experienced the loss of a loved one at some point in our lives. And for many of us, and for whatever reason, the one we loved the most was the one who got away. So what's your story? Does it have a "one who got away" in it? Did the note from Sebastian Cole's at the end of the book strike a chord?

2. **A Story of Undying Love.** *Sand Dollar* is more than just a story about the one who got away; it's a story about undying love. We've all had loved ones in our lives who are no longer with us, not just lovers or spouses, but grandparents,

parents, children, siblings, close friends, etc. And just because we can't see them anymore, it doesn't mean that we've stopped loving them. On the contrary, they will forever occupy a special place in our hearts. When you love someone like that, does your love ever truly die?

3. **Soul Mates.** Does each person really have just *one*? What was it about Robin that was so appealing to Noah? Noah always knew that Robin was his soul mate. But why? After all, she kept leaving him. Noah could have had any woman he wanted, so why was it so hard for him to let go? Perhaps it was because Robin's love transformed him into a better person. Thanks to her, Noah was able to finally cut the cord with his parents and live his own life. Or perhaps it wasn't so much his brain that kept leading him back to her as much as it was his heart. And despite everything, Noah couldn't help but follow his heart. Perhaps we don't really choose love so much as love chooses us. Perhaps it's not exactly our choice...

4. **What About Sarah?** Noah came very close to marrying her. Sarah was more of a friend than a soul mate. However, his heart would always lie in Robin's hands. Do you think Noah should have married Sarah, instead of Robin? Considering the fact that Noah could never quite get over his one true love, Robin, do you think a marriage to Sarah would have been a happy one?

5. **"I Can Love You Like That..."** If Noah were a singer, he'd probably enjoy singing that song by John Michael Montgomery. That's because Noah's heart has a tremendous capacity to love, capable of loving someone more than he loves himself. One of the things that separates *Sand Dollar* from the pack is that it's told from the point of view of the male, not the female. Most traditional publishers of Romance would just assume steer clear of this P.O.V., considering it taboo. So what's your take on the subject? A refreshing change of pace? A unique perspective? And what about all of that raw emotion coming from — of all things — a guy? Do men like Noah really exist? And if so, does society consider them weak and vulnerable? Or would you say that women secretly seek out such a man — someone who could love them like that?

6. **The Moral of the Story.** Noah starts off his narration with, "I had everything a man could possibly need — or so I thought." As it turns out, he had everything

he could possibly need, except for one thing — Robin. And Robin was what he needed most. And so begins Noah’s journey, a journey that ends with this realization: “You see, Robin had made me a better person. She had taught me what really matters in life, and for the last twenty-five years of my life... I felt alive.” So, what, according to Noah, really matters in life? Noah gives us the answer a few paragraphs later, when he says, “I guess what I’m really trying to tell you is... we loved each other’s souls, and as long as we had each other, we were happy. And in the end, that’s all that really matters.” Is this the moral of the story? Can you come up with any others? Which ones resonate with you the most?

- As long as you’ve got each other, material possessions are not that important. You’ve already got what matters most.
- Life is fragile, so cherish the blessings you have in your life while they’re still right there in front of you.
- True love never dies. One way or another, love survives.
- We reap what we sow, making our own destiny in life.
- We don’t choose love; love chooses us. It’s not exactly our choice...
- With peaks of joy and valleys of heartache, life is a rollercoaster ride, the rise and fall of which defines our journey.
- Be true to yourself and your beliefs. Have faith.
- God is with us, even though we may not know it.

7. Sebastian’s Quotes. A few of Sebastian’s quotes have gone viral. Do you have a favorite? For more of his quotes, please visit <http://sebastiancoleauthor.com>.

- If someday you should ever think of me and miss me, know in your heart that I’d want you to find me once again. No matter how distant in time or space... FIND ME.
- The lesson learned: Never take your loved ones for granted. And if you’re ever lucky enough to find that one person in life who makes you love more than any other person could possibly make you love, you treat every day together as if it were your last. You cherish every moment.

- “How about I give you three reasons? Morning, day, and night.” Her eyes narrowed. “Stay... so every morning when I open my eyes, you’ll be the first thing I see. Stay... so every day when I’m with you, I can show you all over again exactly how much you mean to me. And stay... so every night when you lay your head next to mine, you’ll know... you’ll know just how much you’re loved.” Her eyes drifted to the water as she thought for a moment, returning to look deep into Noah’s eyes. “Okay, Noah... I’ll stay.”
- “You remember?” he asked incredulously. “What could you possibly remember?” he demanded, staring at her, impatient. The beauty from within her soul shined brightly through her loving eyes as she looked deep into Noah’s now melting eyes. “I remember — I love you,” she said in a soft voice, nervously biting her lip.

8. **Symbolisms.** They’re an important aspect in *Sand Dollar*. Can you list them all without peaking at the answers below?

- The sand dollar: The fragile sand dollar represents life. An illusion of being solid and secure, it is anything but.
- The North Star: A beacon that guides one's soul toward another.
- The ark that Noah built: A vessel capable of transporting him and Robin to some faraway place, someplace new where they can start life all over again, for all eternity.
- A butterfly: After changing form from its previous state, the butterfly is free to simply flutter off with a passing breeze. Unfortunately for Noah, Robin has similar characteristics.
- A red robin: A red robin is a bird of flight that can never be caged.
- The ocean: Unsheltered freedom is what the ocean represents to Noah.
- Noah’s lighthouse: His dreams and aspirations of living a life that reflects his true self.
- Fairytales: Cinderella, Prince Charming, and Pinocchio. (I’ll leave those up to you.)

9. **What a Beautiful Cover !** Everyone loves the cover. The artist, Deborah DeWit, did an amazing job with it, don't you think? It's actually a pastel drawing, not a painting. To learn more about her work, please visit <http://www.deborahdewit.com>. The author, however, originally envisioned a snorkeling or boating scene for the cover, not a lake scene. Thanks to the artist's encouragement, the extremely romantic and intimate setting of a couple embracing at the end of a dock won out. And the author couldn't be happier with the results. This scene, however, doesn't reflect where the story begins; it reflects where it ends. While reading the book, did you find it odd that the cover didn't seem to fit the story until later on? Nevertheless, the cover includes some very important elements of the story. Can you pick them out? And did you realize that two of those elements couldn't possibly exist concurrently? Which two?

10. **Reveals.** One of Sebastian Cole's favorite reveals of all time is from the movie **Titanic**, when, after being rescued from the frigid ocean, Ruth sticks her hand in her jacket pocket and discovers the blue diamond that everyone's been searching for. Similarly, the author's favorite reveal in *Sand Dollar* comes when Robin finds an envelope on the pillow beside her head, revealing the rhinestone butterfly brooch from Noah's childhood. Can you name some of the other reveals? Any favorites?

- Noah being already dead.
- Josh being God.
- Robin having a hidden secret: Borderline Personality Disorder.
- The details of Robin's past and the fate of the gunman.
- Robin's letter to herself, hidden in a manila envelope for all of those years.
- Noah's boat ending up in heaven.
- The pieces of the shattered sand dollar getting put back together in the end.
- Robin's trusted psychiatrist, Tony, being anything but trustworthy.
- How Robin spent all of her \$257,000 inheritance.
- How Noah spent all of his inheritance.
- Who Olivia's real father is.
- Noah becoming an organ donor, after all.

- Who Noah ends up spending his life with: Robin or Sarah?

11. Love Them or Hate Them? One of the toughest challenges that the author faced while writing the story was getting the reader to like Robin's character. After all, if you don't like her, you're not going to root for Noah to end up with her. One tool that the author used was to have Robin "save the cat", if you will — an simple gesture, like saving a cat from a tree, that makes you like a character, right off the bat. This gesture occurs when Robin gives up her small office space so that a homeless family could have a place to stay. Also, how could you not like a person who selflessly donates her entire inheritance to a homeless shelter?

You liked her then, but probably not so much later on when she leaves Noah, not once, but THREE TIMES ! Yikes. To which you might have wondered, *What in tarnation is wrong with that woman?* Luckily, her upsetting pattern of behavior goes on to be fully explained when it's revealed that she has an illness that she can't control, which stems from traumatic events from her childhood. Furthermore, we learn that she is victimized by an unscrupulous psychiatrist who takes advantage of his influence over her for his own personal gain, convincing her to leave Noah, not once, but twice. Once it was revealed that her actions were not entirely her fault, you probably felt bad for her; but did you ever fully come around to liking her? Did the fact that Noah loved her as much as he did help persuade you?

And what about Noah? Raised with a silver spoon and living a privileged life, his actions in the beginning were materialistic and self-centered, underscored by his apathetic refusal to become a potential organ donor. But somewhere along his journey, he meets Robin, who encourages him to become the man she always knew him to be. As a result, his priorities change, and he realizes that the only thing he really needs is Robin. From beginning to end, Noah's character goes through a type of arc. And as you travelled that arc, you probably wanted to scream at Noah for making certain decisions. Perhaps you even threw the book across the room, only to pick it up to continue reading where you left off. Well, maybe not...

If the author was successful, he evoked a plethora of emotions in the reader, including anger, sadness, happiness, and joy. *Sand Dollar* is not just a tearjerker — it's an emotion jerker. But is it okay to both love and hate the main characters at different times? Is that even allowed in a romance novel? But before you

answer, consider that, in real life, it's the ones we love the most who usually end up hurting us the most. Life never seems to go the way we plan. And with love, comes pain. Why should fiction be any different?

12. **Unconditional Love.** Noah attempted to walk the line between accepting his parents for who they are and living a life that he could call his own. Despite his parents' strong grip over him, Noah still loved his parents. And although they probably came across as being evil and self-serving, especially Miriam, her intentions were basically good, however misguided. No one is a perfect parent, nor is anyone a perfect son or daughter. We all make mistakes in our relationships; and we all have to deal with cards we never asked for. Noah knew that deep down his parents loved him in their own way, albeit with conditions attached. Noah, on the other hand, loved unconditionally. Is it really possible to have unconditional love for a person who has hurt us? And if so, is this a divine quality?

13. **Harry *Who?*** Remember Harry? A pretty insignificant character, wouldn't you say? Yet, after his conversation with Noah, Noah is determined to build the little sailboat after all, fulfilling the vow he once made to Robin. To refresh your memory, here's that conversation:

“The name's Noah.”

“Oh, right... like in that book.”

“You mean the Bible?”

“Yeah, that's the one...” Harry shot back. “The one where everybody thinks building an ark is such a crazy idea — everybody except for Noah. But Noah don't listen to nobody, cuz he has faith.”

“Yeah, I guess he did.”

“He sure showed them, huh?”

Noah nodded.

“Can you imagine how he must have felt when it finally started raining?” Harry remarked with insight in his eyes, giving Noah the once over and walking away.

As he reached the building, it started to drizzle. “Hey, Noah,” he called out, turning around with his palm extended. “Looks like rain.”

And while building his boat, Noah has this conversation with Miriam:

“That’s right, Mom. It’s an ark built just for two — Robin and me. Don’t ask me how, but I swear God told me to just have faith and build it. So someday when she returns, we can get in it together and be carried off to some faraway place, someplace new where we can start life all over again...”

Since Harry was Noah’s inspiration for building his boat, is the author saying that Harry somehow represents God? Or, like a fine work of art, is he leaving it up to interpretation?

14. So What’s in a Name, Anyway? The author chose the names of his characters very carefully. He obviously chose the name Noah because of his love for the ocean, not to mention the fact that he builds an ark ! He chose the name Robin because she’s like a red robin, free to take flight at any moment. And did you know that Joshua (Josh, for short) is one of the older biblical translations of Jesus? Josh, who’s an orderly at Mount Sinai (and we all know who Moses ran into there), has the odd last name of Numen. Do you know what “numen” means? Grab a dictionary to find out !

15. The Key to Josh. When Josh introduces himself to Noah at the beginning of the story, Noah thinks that Josh looks familiar. Is it a case of mistaken identity? Perhaps we sometimes come into contact with God in the people we meet, and in Noah’s case, that just might be Harry. Or perhaps Noah knows God more intimately than he thinks, while at the same time not being able to completely recognize him? And speaking of white linen robes, why was it so important for Josh to give him one? The answer lies tucked away in the pocket.

16. Okay, How Did I Miss *That One*? In heaven, imagine that time passes differently than here on earth. In the last chapter of the book, Noah’s soul presses the Up arrow and steps into an elevator, arriving in heaven a moment later. Just

in case you missed it, how much time passed on earth while Noah rode the elevator? As a point of reference, recall that throughout all of the hospital scenes, Noah is eighty and Robin is seventy. Hint: The answer lies in the following passage, which takes place while Noah is in the elevator:

Josh is all alone in a hallway. He picks up the clipboard hanging on the side of his cart and puts on his glasses to read the next name on the list. He hangs the clipboard back up and pushes the cart down the hallway, passing Doctor Feldman, who now looks **twenty years** older. He stops at the next room and knocks lightly on the door, waits, then knocks again, this time louder.

“Please come in,” says the sweet voice of an elderly woman.

Josh pushes the door open with his cart and enters the room, taking a tray of food out from underneath it and placing it on a table extended out over a **ninety-two-year-old** woman, who is sitting up in her hospital bed.

“Thank you so much,” she says in a kind voice. “It’s exactly what I wanted,” she says, looking down at the dinner on her tray.

“My name’s Josh... Josh Numen,” he says, handing her a cup of wine. “What’s yours?”

“Robin...” she says, taking a sip of wine. “Robin Hartman,” she says with a pleasant smile. “Would you like to hear my story?”

17. **Echoes.** Did you happen to notice that the story ends in much the same way as it began, a kind of echo, if you will, with Josh knocking on the door to serve dinner? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could all have that opportunity someday, when all is said and done, to tell God our own unique story? And for that matter, think of all the real-life Joshes out there in hospitals all across the country, listening to strangers narrate their stories for the very last time, stories that one day could be our own.

18. **Noah’s Ark.** With Robin cuddling up into Noah’s loving arms as they sail off into the light, is this the perfect ending to a love story like this? Noah refers to his little boat as an ark. Compare that to the large Ark in the Bible, which was boarded by two of every species of animal in an attempt to avoid what would

have otherwise been certain death, had they remained on land. With nothing in sight, the Ark sails away, eventually coming to rest on a foreign peak. For those who made the passage, life now has a new beginning, one capable of sustaining itself for all eternity. Looking at it from this perspective, is it at all possible to interpret the biblical Ark differently — not so much as a literal vessel that transported its passengers to a foreign land, but rather, a figurative one that transported the faithful to a place where their lives could flourish even after death, a place called heaven? Pretty deep for a romance novel, huh?

19. **“If You Build It, They Will Come.”** Inspired by the words of a seemingly insignificant homeless man, Noah builds his boat on blind faith, hoping for the inconceivable outcome that one day his long lost love would return to him. Does this remind you of that popular theme from **Field of Dreams**? And how does it relate to destiny? Do you think we make our own destiny in life?

20. **The Hospital Scenes.** The major plot twist in *Sand Dollar* is that the person telling the story, Noah, doesn't know that he's already dead. In fact, it's not really Noah who's telling the story; it's his soul. And unbeknownst to him, his actual body is lying in the hospital bed, brain dead and comatose, his heart kept alive by a respirator. As he narrates his story of love and loss to Josh, Noah's soul invariably discovers certain truths about the past, present, and future. What are these truths?

The hospital scenes that are scattered throughout the book are repeated as one continuous scene at the very end. However, there's a slight variation this time, as Noah's body lies lifeless in the bed, and Josh isn't there. Can you explain why those earlier hospital scenes repeated a second time? It's because the two timelines intersect. The story being told by Noah's soul catches up to present day, where the situation in the hospital room is unfolding. The story then moves forward from there.

Throughout the hospital scenes, Noah's soul is trying to remember something important that he needed to tell Robin. When he finds out that he is, in fact, already dead, he suddenly remembers what he needed to tell her. He begs Josh for one more minute on earth with Robin. After Josh grants his wish in the form of a miracle, Noah comes back to life, just long enough to remind Robin about the vow they once made having to do with the North Star. And with his final breaths, Noah says, “On that day, you and I will simply sail away.” Why was it

so important for him to tell this to Robin? Where is he suggesting that they'll sail to?

21. **The Journey.** Here's a review of *Sand Dollar* that compares the words from T.S. Elliot's poem, "Little Gidding", to Noah's journey in *Sand Dollar*. Do you agree with this interpretation? If so, how does it apply?

"I would not choose to read romantic fiction as a matter of course, but I would recommend this narrative most heartily because it touches on the theme of life being a journey, the start and the end of which is not of our choosing, but the duration of which challenges us at every step to make the right the decisions for ourselves, and those around us. And at the end of the journey, we arrive at an all too familiar place."

— Serendipities of Life

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

— T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

22. **What a Beautiful Song !** Have you ever listened to **I Will Be Here** by Steven Curtis Chapman? You can find it on his **All About Love** album on iTunes, or visit <http://stevencurtischapman.com> for more information about the artist. Considered to be Christian/Gospel, his music is generally not as well known as music from other genres. Nevertheless, the song is the perfect backdrop to Noah's story of undying love and devotion. In fact, the song fits so well, you might think that the story was written from it. (That's not the case, however.) So after listening to this heartfelt song, what are your thoughts? Do you think Steven Curtis Chapman's words, "I will be here", are meant to have more than just one meaning, suggesting that God, too, feels this way about us? Similarly, in *Sand Dollar*, there's one other person who says a slight variation of these words. Do you remember who? Here's a hint:

"**I'll be here** if you need me," Josh states reassuringly.

“Yeah. Somehow I always knew,” I say, nodding my head with a subtle smile, feeling as if I’ve known him my whole life. “I just never admitted it... until now.”

23. **Sand Dollar, The Movie?** Do you think *Sand Dollar* would make a good movie? The concept for *Sand Dollar* was originally developed as a movie treatment. The narration, written in italicized in the book, would be Noah’s voiceover in a movie. Which actors and actresses would you like to see play the roles of Noah, Robin, Josh, and the others?

24. **Borderline Personality Disorder.** Have you ever heard of it? Most people haven’t. Yet, it’s more prevalent than you’d think. In order to diagnose it, doctors have to look at someone’s long-term pattern of behavior. And even then, the symptoms are not so obvious. Do you think it’s possible for people with B.P.D. to overcome their disorder over time, to a point where it no longer controls their lives? By the way, Borderlines don’t actually suffer from “emotional amnesia” — that was artistic license — but they can surely act like it. Can you think of other books or movies that might have characters with symptoms consistent with B.P.D? To learn more about Borderline Personality Disorder, here are a few helpful links:

- National Education Alliance for BPD (NEABPD), <http://www.borderlinepersonalitydisorder.com>
- Treatment and Research Advancements (TARA), <http://www.tara4bpd.org/tara.html>
- Borderline Personality Disorder Resource Center, <http://bpdresourcecenter.org>
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>
- National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI), <http://www.nami.org>
- BPD Central, <http://www.bpdcentral.com>

If you have additional questions for Sebastian, he’d be happy to answer them. You can email him at Sebastian@SebastianColeAuthor.com, or visit his website at SebastianColeAuthor.com.