

A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman Study Guide

**A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman
by Joan Anderson**

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Plot Summary

"A Year By the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman" tells of the author's real-life spiritual journey over the course of a year. Joan Anderson decided that she needed a year apart from her husband of many years and stayed alone in their Cape Cod cottage for a year, getting to know herself again. She learned many things about herself, and her husband decided to come live with her, making big changes in their marriage.

When Joan's husband took a new job that required a cross-country move, Joan realized that she did not feel like dutifully following her husband any more. Instead, she moved alone to their Cape Cod vacation cottage, where she could reminisce about her childhood and try to figure out where she had gone wrong. She knew that her marriage was boring and stale and she was tired of always shouldering the domestic, social, and emotional responsibilities for the whole family. Joan knew that she had married young and foolishly, and had pushed her own two sons into a similar pattern. She felt that she had lost her sense of adventure and living in the moment. Joan could not decide if she wanted to be single or married, but she knew that her marriage was not fulfilling her as it was, and she knew she needed to really examine what she wanted from it.

Surrounded by nature, Joan felt revitalized. She loved walking or biking along the coastline, but her favorite activity was swimming with seals, or spending hours completely alone on a deserted sandbar. When she needed money, Joan got jobs working in a fish market, or digging for clams, and she was proud of her physical strength and capability, despite being in her fifties. As she made new friends, Joan gradually opened up more and more to having a social life again, and allowed several groups of people to come stay with her, including an independent film crew. Joan was even able to handle hosting her family's Memorial Day weekend get-together, but she had finally learned to let go and let others handle some of the details and cooking, so that she could relax.

After nearly a year, Joan's husband had also done a lot of thinking and growing, and he realized how much he missed being married to her. He decided to retire and move in with her at Cape Cod, but they both recognized that they must have their own individual space and not fall into old, destructive patterns. Joan agreed to let him back into her life, and shared with him her new friends, and some of the lessons nature had taught her. Joan looked forward to the adventures and growth that the future held for both of them.

Chapter 1, Ebb Tide

Chapter 1, Ebb Tide Summary

A Year By the Sea begins with an ending, as Joan and her husband of many years prepared to separate for several months. Joan found herself overwhelmed, but looking forward to the personal growth and understanding that she hoped to gain, living alone in her Cape Cod cottage.

Young Joan met her future husband at Yale, where they were both students together, and although things were not perfect between them, Joan was determined to get married within a few years, and he seemed like a good enough candidate. The young man brought Joan home to meet his parents, who decided that Joan was the right girl for their son. To show just how supportive Joan's future in-laws were of this relationship, the young man's mother handed him a family heirloom engagement ring, which he passed to Joan. This implied that, not only was he marrying Joan to please his parents, but that in a way, it was more like Joan was marrying their entire family. They got married, and soon had two sons.

Over the years, Joan played the role of loving caretaker to her family, but she wished that her husband would show her more affection and reveal more of his feelings to her, rather than being standoffish, composed, and polite. To compensate for her loneliness, she would often throw elaborate parties where she entertained everyone, but her husband would always just sit quietly in the corner. Her husband would describe them by saying that she was Technicolor (the brand-name for the first movies with brilliant color), while he was black-and-white (like older, cheaper movies and television broadcasts). Once in a while, Joan would blow up and confront her husband, but she always ended up feeling silly when he would inevitably respond with absolute calm. Once she realized that her marriage had gone stale, Joan tried to relive the special moments vicariously through her sons, encouraging them and supporting them. In her efforts to regain some of the magic that had left her life after years of boring marriage, Joan pushed both of her sons into early marriages.

One day, Joan's husband announced to her that he had been offered a new job, far away, which would require moving. When he told his wife, he had already accepted the position. Since Joan was a writer and could write anywhere, he assumed that she would not mind moving across the country, but she surprised both of them by deciding that she would rather not go with him. Joan's husband did not argue with her, although he did not endorse her plan. Since they owned a small vacation cottage in Cape Cod, she decided to spend several months there, for a trial separation. They packed up all their things, and left their house behind with a "For Sale" sign in the yard. As Joan's husband drove away, Joan leaned against her car and cried, overwhelmed with confused emotions about this major life step, which represented both failure and a desire to grow.



Joan drove through New England from Nyack to Cape Cod, and along the way, she was comforted by the familiarity of her surroundings. She grew up spending her summers in Cape Cod, and every landmark had a memory associated with it. These memories helped Joan feel that she knew who she was. She realized that she was not on a tight schedule, so she stopped in New Haven to visit Yale University, reminiscing about her time there with the man she had just left. Farther along, Joan stopped and just sat on the beach, watching the tide. This was ebb tide, the intermediate time when the tide was neither rising nor falling. Ebb tide had always been Joan's least favorite time of day, because the shallow water was good neither for digging clams nor swimming, and it was boring. Now, as Joan watched the still water, she thought to herself that she needed a time of ebb tide in her own life, a time when there would be no demands on her and nothing that she had to accomplish. She thought that, if she hoped to grow and learn through this experience, and figure out how to start over, she must first allow herself to be idle and examine herself, to find out what exactly she wanted in her life.

Chapter 1, Ebb Tide Analysis

When Joan was fighting her natural inclination to go along with her husband, she compared herself to the Bible character Ruth. When Ruth's husband dies, she is left with her mother-in-law, Naomi, who decides to return to her native land far away, but Ruth is so loyal that she goes with Naomi. All her life, Joan had exemplified this attitude, but it had not been enough to revive her cold marriage. Joan realized that she was so worried about being lonely and alone, that she could not focus on who she really was. Paradoxically, in order for her to have the personal growth that she needed to be able to have a mature relationship, Joan must temporarily turn away from her marriage.

Sometimes, the greatest barriers to personal growth are the things which people hate to acknowledge about themselves, or the subjects which a person has always avoided. Joan realized that, although she hated ebb tide for its dull, in-between stagnation, this was precisely what she was lacking in her own life. She had managed to create her own high tide with a frenzy of activity, so that she never had to settle in and examine her life. She had kept herself so busy that she did not know who she was. Simply the fact that she was willing to sit at ebb tide and allow time to pass shows that she had the courage to face her demons, because she cared more about her own growth than about being comfortable with her surroundings.

Chapter 2, The Call of the Seal, and Chapter 3, Seal Sense

Chapter 2, The Call of the Seal, and Chapter 3, Seal Sense Summary

After spending three weeks alone with no calendar, Joan lost her sense of time, and her only daily outing was to the post office. One morning, Joan ran out of coffee, so she took the opportunity to visit Larry's PX, a local fishermen's hangout. Joan ignored the surprised stares she got from the rough, grizzled fishermen when she entered, and amid dead silence she ordered breakfast. As the men grew more used to her presence, they started talking again, and she listened with interest to their conversations. As she listened, the fishermen talked about the thousands of seals in the harbor. Joan got so excited at the thought of all those seals that she impulsively asked the man sitting next to her if he would take her out there in his boat. The man, Joshua Cahoon, called her bluff and told her to meet him at the pier in a half-hour with warm clothes and a sandwich.

With practically no time to think about what she was doing, Joan raced home to grab a sweater, peanut butter, and a stale bagel, and met an amused Josh at his boat. The ride was thrilling, and Joan remembered how much better she liked such visceral experiences, than the polite, domestic life she had gotten used to. Josh surprised her when he told her to jump out of the boat near the shore of a sandbar covered with seals, and he told her he would be back at high tide. Joan took her things and waded to the shore among the seals. After Josh had sped away, she took off her wet jeans and wandered around, knowing she had about eight hours before high tide.

Joan wished that she had brought more equipment with her, like an umbrella, sunscreen, and better food. She reflected that she already spent too much of her life preparing for adventure instead of going out and living. Without planning to, she jumped into the ocean, and was delighted when the seals decided that they trusted her enough to swim alongside her and bump against her in the water. Joan mused that she needed to learn to enjoy things, and to live like a child again. When Josh returned for her, she was brimming with energy, and he gave her some of the clams he had dug up.

That evening, Joan was at home reflecting on the experiences of her day, when her husband called her on the phone. He told her that their house had been sold, and suggested that now she could come live with him. To put off answering him, Joan told him about her wonderful day with the seals, but in response, he just made her feel bad, asking questions that showed that he did not understand why she would want to go swim with seals. When she was hanging up, Joan knew why it was so important that she came here to have time alone.

Chapter 2, The Call of the Seal, and Chapter 3, Seal Sense Analysis

Joan contrasted her husband with Joshua Cahoon, mentally thinking about their physical differences, since Josh was a rugged outdoorsman, while her husband was a proper, polite professional. She did not immediately realize that a bigger difference was the way that they responded to her whims. When Joan wanted to go to the seal island, Josh did not ask her why or tell her that she was crazy and impractical, but instead challenged her to show that she was not afraid. When Joan told her husband about it, he acted like she was irresponsible, leaving him to take care of the business of selling their house. Joan realized that she could not spend her entire life submitting her own needs and wants for those of her family, and she was tired of being the one in control, who must always take care of others around her.

Joan felt that the seals, as animals, possessed a sort of earthy wisdom which was playful, and thankful for current circumstances, rather than wishing for something else. She admired the seals for their warm layer of body fat, and thought about how much embarrassment she had felt over the years, trying to cover up her own chubby frame. She wanted to obtain the carefree, unself-conscious mindset of a child, just enjoying life as it came to her.

Chapter 4, Riptide, and Chapter 5, Water Therapy

Chapter 4, Riptide, and Chapter 5, Water Therapy Summary

Joan started getting up each morning to watch the sun rise. She felt transformed by it, and watched the other people around her, who also showed up to wait for the arrival of the sun. Seeing them made her reminisce wistfully about her marriage. She remembered a time when she and her husband went swimming in the ocean together, but got separated by a riptide. They both realized that they would have to swim to safety individually, and now Joan felt that this was once again the case. Restless, and not wanting to ask her husband for money, Joan decided to get a job. When she saw that a fish market was hiring, she asked for a job, and the surprised owner agreed to hire her.

Joan's new job was hard work, and she often made mistakes. Most people thought it strange that she wanted to work in such a rough environment with a bunch of burly fishermen, but Joan liked the idea of doing something unexpected. The dirty work made her feel strong and self-reliant, although she could not help comparing herself with the wealthy trophy wives who came in and ordered expensive fish. Although Joan envied them their easy lifestyle, she knew that they were bound to look and act a certain way, and Joan decided that she was happy to have the freedom to work where she wanted to. She also loved being around all the water, and she admitted to herself that she had always been fascinated by the fishermen's wives shelling clams on the docks.

Joan's job taught her humility. She learned to be quiet and act like a servant, and the fishermen did not pry about her life. Joan did not reveal that she and her husband were separated, since most people thought she was in town to work on a book. One evening after a hard day of work, the other workers at the fish market, who were all men, asked Joan if she would like to stay afterward and share some wine, and Joan was grateful for the companionship. They laughed together and told stories, and it made Joan miss her own sons.

Chapter 4, Riptide, and Chapter 5, Water Therapy Analysis

Joan realized how constrictive are traditional roles about how women should live their lives. This is not limited to women, of course, but Joan, who was conditioned from an early age to be submissive and accommodating, was exploring ways that she could reject the traditional image of a woman as a selfless caregiver. Although Joan was lonely and envied amorous couples, imagining them to have perfect relationships, she remembered from many friends how a marriage can look happy from the outside, but

hide all sorts of dysfunction. Joan imagined that she could see a strong, exhilarating confidence in the women that she saw walking along, alone and unfettered. Many people would think that, at Joan's age, she was too old to learn new skills, like preparing raw fish and climbing all over lobster cages. Joan understood that she was still young enough to grow and learn, and she relished her obstacles, knowing that they were pushing her to grow past her fears and weaknesses.

Chapter 6, Waves of Truth, and Chapter 7, Silent Seas, Silent Nights

Chapter 6, Waves of Truth, and Chapter 7, Silent Seas, Silent Nights Summary

Joan liked to spend her early mornings simply, sitting next to her wood-burning stove thinking, while she waited for her water to boil for coffee. She reminisced about past Christmases, which she was always in charge of making into lively affairs. She thought about how stressful it always was, and looked forward to a relaxing Christmas, determined to see to her own happiness for once. Nervous, she avoided the loudness and flashing lights of a commercialized Christmas, not even wanting to go to the fish market Christmas party. The market closed for the season, and Joan tried to find something to wear to the party. She panicked when she realized that she had gained weight, and many of her clothes no longer fit. When she found an acceptable outfit, Joan calmed down and told herself not to worry about it. She knew that unpleasant times might be coming, but she wanted to be happy in the moment.

Joan was nervous because her husband was due to arrive two days before Christmas. Neither of them wanted to spend the holidays alone. Joan hoped that they would be able to get through it without hurting one another, or, worse, falling back into their old domestic pattern, with Joan doing all the work while her husband relaxed. To distract herself while she waited, Joan cooked up a Christmas feast. When her husband arrived, they were polite to one another, not wanting to fight. They slept in separate bedrooms, but in the morning, Joan woke up to a warm house, and a cup of coffee on her bedside table. She spontaneously suggested that they visit the beach, since there had just been a blizzard, and to her surprise, he agreed.

Joan was moved by the frozen shore, but her husband was less impressed. Nonetheless, he impulsively fetched a pathetic pine tree, and gathered seashells with which to decorate it. As Joan made a snow angel, her husband commented that she had changed and become more free. That evening, they went to church and watched a Christmas pageant featuring children dressed as fishermen instead of shepherds. They both acknowledged that, although their marriage seemed to be frozen at the moment, it was not completely dead, and they both still hoped that it could heal.

Chapter 6, Waves of Truth, and Chapter 7, Silent Seas, Silent Nights Analysis

Joan had often resented her husband's quiet nature, as he passively allowed her to expend energy, while he observed. She had not noticed that she had been creating a situation for him to do just that, as she rushed around, assuming the responsibility of

ensuring the happiness of everyone around her. Joan was nervous that her husband would have a problem with her newfound quietness and idleness, but instead, he seemed to appreciate her slowing down enough to enjoy the moment. He indicated that he wished he could obtain the freedom she had found, but he did not realize that it was freedom of attitude, as she stopped worrying about what other people expected of her.

Joan mentally compared her marriage to several boats which had gotten frozen in place in the harbor. She knew that there was nothing their owners could do to move the boats during winter, but they would move easily enough when spring came. She tried to think of her marriage in these terms, believing that her relationship still had enough value to wait patiently for the thaw. Her husband also compared their marriage to the scraggly little Christmas tree, which made them both laugh. Although the tree was weak and ugly, they still found joy in it.



Chapter 8, Getting My Feet Wet, and Chapter 9, Fogged In

Chapter 8, Getting My Feet Wet, and Chapter 9, Fogged In Summary

On New Year's Eve, Joan stood in a ridiculous Red Riding Hood costume, waiting to take part in a footrace. This costumed race to ring in the new year was a local tradition. Joan knew that she was out of shape, having spent her entire life trying to forget that her body was a part of her, and just trying to cover it up. She now had such pains from aging that she knew she had to start taking better care of herself, so she decided to cement her decision by beginning the year at a full run. Once the race started, she was exhilarated, but she quickly got tired and felt like she was going to die. Joan was heartened by the horn-honking encouragement from a female cop who was about her age and weight. Joan imagined that she was showing the police officer what any woman was capable of, so she persisted, even though she felt like she could not do it. When she reached the finish line, Joan knew that she had entered a new phase in life, having succeeded at a new goal for the first time.

By February, being cooped up alone in the cottage had gotten Joan down, and she felt depressed and lethargic. Her father died, and then Joan's brother decided not to come to the funeral, which angered Joan. After a big fight, Joan's brother actually threw her out of his house, and completely cut off contact between them. Joan looked at old photos, remembering how as a child, she moved so often that she was always trying to be whatever the people around her wanted her to be. Stir-crazy, Joan decided to live a little, and ventured out into the winter fog, to explore the shoreline. Joan Anderson (the author) was surprised to meet a very old woman in the fog, whose name was Joan Erikson. The two women scampered across the dunes together, and Joan A. was impressed with how wise, lively and spry Joan E. seemed to be, despite her age. They agreed to meet again to get to know one another better.

Chapter 8, Getting My Feet Wet, and Chapter 9, Fogged In Analysis

Joan A. was learning, in her fifties, what it means to be a woman. Up until this point, she had always just tried to fit in and be what others desired, and she realized that she was not quite sure what a strong, mature woman is really like. Her relative innocence, and the girlish, victim-like role that she has played, are represented by her New Year's costume, Little Red Riding Hood. Little Red is starting on a journey, but she is easily led astray, and is victimized or rescued by the masculine characters she meets, having little power or survival skills of her own. Joan A. might have been weak and inexperienced, as she began her run, but she rejected the traditional role of helpless victim, instead

pushing her body to perform with strength, even though it hurt. Once she had learned to stand firm herself, she met her mentor, who was stronger, and seemed younger, even though she was very old. Joan E. was a good role model for Joan A. to aspire to, because she showed that a woman can be a good wife, and still live a life for herself, never abandoning the child within. She helped Joan A. understand how important it is to have fun.

Chapter 10, Seal Woman, and Chapter 11, Ebb and Flow

Chapter 10, Seal Woman, and Chapter 11, Ebb and Flow Summary

Joan A. and Joan E. quickly became best friends, instantly recognizing that they were kindred spirits. Joan E. wrote a poem for Joan A., urging her to have patience while she strove for answers. Joan E. encouraged Joan A., which was the first time that someone actually affirmed Joan A.'s decision to come here and live separately from her husband. The two women went on walks together, going on a treasure hunt to find objects which could bring them understanding of their own souls.

In April, Joan A. found her carefully cultivated solitude being bombarded with guests who wanted to share her cottage. First, Joan E. asked her to host some friends of hers, a psychologist and his wife, who was an Episcopal priest. Joan was lured by the thought of free psychoanalysis, so she agreed, and she found that they were very nice people. Soon after they left, Joan A. was surprised by a visit from her friend Hazel, who came to make sure that Joan was all right. Hazel stayed overnight, and said that she wished she could come here and be alone like Joan was doing. Finally, Joan's nephew called her, because he was shooting an independent film. He needed a cook for the cast and crew, and he also needed a place for them all to stay while they were in town for eight days. Reluctantly, Joan agreed, because she remembered her own theater days, and missed the glamor of putting on a show. She enjoyed being a part of her nephew's project. When everyone had left, Joan reflected to herself that it was all right for her to have guests and open up her home, as long as she did not let her guests walk all over her, and as long as she always had the power to make them leave.

Chapter 10, Seal Woman, and Chapter 11, Ebb and Flow Analysis

When Joan A. and Joan E. were going on the "treasure hunt for their souls," Joan A. started gathering beach glass, also called sea glass. Beach glass is made when broken glass from human litter is repeatedly washed up and down a shore with the tides, until all of its edges are smooth to the touch, having been ground down by the sand. Joan thought to herself that the beach glass was a good metaphor for herself, since she had been through a lot, but her experiences had made her more valuable. She also looked at some clam shells that she picked up, and thought that the whole clam, with two shells tightly held together, was like her family, but that, when they have no need to be in that state, the family can let go of one another, just as the bivalve separates from its shell, and the shells separate from one another. Joan A. wondered whether she still needed to be attached to her husband.

Joan A. was surprised that she did not learn anything about herself from talking to the psychologist, but when she explained this to Joan E., this made Joan E. laugh. Joan E. told her that wisdom does not come from men like him, but from inside her own heart. Joan A. was learning that her own innate wisdom was good enough for her to live, and that she no longer needed to worry about pleasing everyone.

Chapter 12, Low Tide, and Chapter 13, Treading Water

Chapter 12, Low Tide, and Chapter 13, Treading Water Summary

One day in May, Joan's hot water heater broke, and she found out that it would cost \$1,200 to fix it. Although she wanted to be self-sufficient, Joan gave in and called her husband to ask him for the money. He told her that he did not have the money to help her, because he was paying for the house that he had hoped they would be sharing. When he suggested that she just get one of her fisherman friends to help her, Joan hung up on him. Through her mind flashed scenes of all the times that he had left her hanging, failing to come to her rescue when she really needed him. Joan remembered her husband going to a board meeting while she was having a miscarriage, and another time, when she waited for hours on a train platform for him to pick her up, while her period ran down her legs. Kicking herself for even asking her husband for help, Joan thought about all the women in her family who had overcome daunting obstacles to make their way in the world. Joan headed down to the docks to look for a job.

Joan ran into her friend Josh Cahoon, who suggested that she try digging for clams to get money. Joan decided to do it, but on her first day, she made slow progress, and the work was very hard on her upper body. As she got more used to it, she enjoyed the Zen attitude of clamming, and she learned not to force things, but to let them happen at their own time. She thought about some flowers brought to her by a neighbor, who had taken the boughs inside and forced them to bud and bloom early, before the warm season. For some reason, these premature blossoms were unnerving to Joan, because they seemed so unnatural to her. Soon, Joan earned enough money clamming to pay the down payment on her hot water heater, so she could finally take a bath.

Joan's family usually got together for Memorial Day weekend. She was nervous about being reunited with everyone, especially because she had always taken on the role of the perfect hostess, even if the stress made her worn out and grouchy. Joan also felt awkward around her sons' wives, who were emotionally distant to her. For this gathering, Joan decided she would only cook one meal, and allow the others to worry about the logistics of the other meals. Her family arrived, and when they discovered that she had been digging clams to earn money, they were surprised and impressed, knowing that clamming is hard work. The family spent the day at the beach, and they all relaxed and enjoyed the weather, the sand, and the knowledge that the day was special, never to be repeated. Joan allowed herself to be happy.

Chapter 12, Low Tide, and Chapter 13, Treading Water Analysis

Joan realized that the reason she was bothered by the branch that had been forced to bloom prematurely, was that she thought that the process of becoming takes time to happen right, and she mentally compared herself to a huge, bountiful blossom, which comes back year after year, with no cultivation. She pondered the way that people change over the years, and how it is impossible to predict how someone will change. She thought of these surprises as birthday presents which are wonderful to open. Joan realized the negative toll on her life of trying too hard to live up to people's expectations of her, so she made an effort not to put pressure on her sons to be a certain way. Joan understood that she and her family were not perfect, but they were all still valuable.

Chapter 14, Safe Harbor

Chapter 14, Safe Harbor Summary

After the rest of the family left, Joan's older son and his wife stayed with her for a little while longer, before embarking on a long bicycling trip that they were taking together. Joan knew that she would miss their company, but she was looking forward to getting her life, and her solitude back. Still, she missed the companionship of marriage, and was surprised to realize how much she missed having a sex life. Joan thought about how she still wanted her marriage to succeed, even after so much time alone, but she was only interested if her husband would meet her half-way. She knew that her marriage had lost its sense of balance because she was always putting the needs of others before her own and they were happy to let her do it.

Inspired by her son and his wife, Joan rode her bike to the old general store, and as memories of the place came back to her from childhood, she felt like she was at home. Joan realized that she did not ever want to move away from this area of Cape Cod, because she would always see it as home, as her safe harbor. Joan rode home and was surprised to see several workmen on her roof, fixing the places where it leaked. Joan told them that they had the wrong house, but they informed her that her husband had called them several weeks ago, requesting that they fix the roof. Joan called her husband to ask what was going on, and he confessed that he had ordered the workmen because he wanted to reinvest in their marriage. He had come to see how important the cottage was to Joan and the whole family, and did not want those special family traditions to die out when the cottage fell into disrepair. In fact, her husband planned to retire soon, and hoped to move back east and come live in the cottage with Joan. As Joan thought about what her husband had said, she was not sure how she felt about this development, because she had come to love her solitary, unencumbered lifestyle. She decided that it was all right that she did not know what the future held, and that she was not going to stress herself out over it.

Chapter 14, Safe Harbor Analysis

Joan mentally asserted that her son's biking holiday was symbolic of the longer journey that he and his wife had before them, the journey of adult life, and marriage. Joan knew that her son and his wife would be forced to depend on one another during their trip, and it made her think of times when she and her husband had to depend on one another, and how it brought them closer at the time. In contrast with this, Joan felt that her marriage had come to embody indifference rather than interdependence. This sad resignation is contrasted with the unexpected hope provided by Joan's husband's generous decision to fix the roof of the cottage. This implies that he had had his fill of indifference, and was willing to try to regain that interdependence. Although he did not say as much, it seems that perhaps Joan's husband felt guilty about his wife having to

do hard manual labor to fix the hot water heater, and he realized that he was not being a good husband. Fixing the roof could be his way of apologizing.

Chapter 15, Wild and Salty

Chapter 15, Wild and Salty Summary

In August, Joan was still trying to decide what she wanted to do about her marriage, and whether or not to let her husband move back in with her after he retired. She decided to spend twenty-four hours alone on the tiny island covered with seals, as a sort of spiritual quest. Once Joan was dropped off on the seal island, she felt anxious, knowing that she was utterly alone and on her own, should any emergency arise. After Joan set up her camp, she felt more relaxed, having a safe base to go back to, and she set off exploring the island, gathering driftwood for firewood. Joan saw a group of seals, and thought about how the seals had set her onto a different life path by their influence. Joan ate her dinner by the fire while watching the sunset, opting not to write in her journal, because she did not want to miss a single thing.

Joan saw a temporary sandbar nearby, which grew and shrank, and sometimes disappeared altogether, as the tides moved the sand around. Joan spontaneously stripped naked, and swam out to the sandbar. Feeling the intense freedom, she decided that as long as she could remain close to nature and true to herself, she could accomplish anything, including reconciliation with her husband.

Chapter 15, Wild and Salty Analysis

Many truths about her life were revealed to Joan during her vigil at the seal island. Joan realized how important it was to her to remain close to nature, enjoying her body and the world around her. She also learned from the seals the joy and wisdom of living in the moment, rather than focusing on what is not, or what might be. Joan was nervous about allowing her husband back into her life, and she knew that, in order to avoid crowding or cramping one another, she and her husband would have to learn to appreciate their differences.

When Joan swam naked out to the sandbar, the experience was rich with meaning. She saw the sandbar itself as a symbol for her life, as it changed unpredictably with each passing moment. She realized that she did not need to be afraid to let it change and develop, but could instead enjoy and appreciate the uniqueness of every moment. Swimming nude, Joan thought that she was a good simile for Aphrodite, who is often depicted as a naked woman in the sea. Aphrodite represents utterly feminine sexuality and beauty, and this simile shows how Joan was looking forward to trying marriage again. This also shows her newfound confidence in her body, seeing it as sexy and powerful, rather than hiding it.

Chapter 16, Port of Call

Chapter 16, Port of Call Summary

Labor Day weekend marked the end of the summer season. All the summer residents packed up and left town, so that only the year-round locals were left behind in a quiet, empty town. Joan and her husband had finally decided to move back in together, and to celebrate his retirement, Joan had invited a handful of her friends to join them in a surprise party at a bar. Before the party, Joan lounged on her porch in a towel, enjoying her last few hours as a single woman. Although she did not mind having her husband come live in her cottage, Joan kept aside one room just for herself, to be alone in.

When he arrived at the party, Joan's husband was pleased at the effort she had shown, and he was touched that she used her own money from the fish market to pay for it. Over dinner, they reminisced about times in their marriage, coming to the conclusion that it was necessary for them to support one another, but also have individual lives of their own. Joan could tell that her husband had also been undergoing a journey of his own over the past year, and she knew that they were both determined not to fall into the same patterns as before. As they headed off to bed, Joan's husband asked her if she would take him to see the seals the next day. He wanted to see why the seals were so important to his wife, and learn what he could from them. Joan looked forward to having many adventures with and without her husband.````

Chapter 16, Port of Call Analysis

There are several objects in this chapter which signify the change in Joan's and her husband's lives. Joan planted one hundred tulip bulbs, showing her hope for the future, noting that they represented the way that she could continue blooming year after year, just like a tulip bulb. At the retirement party, a friend symbolically cut off Joan's husband's tie, indicating that he would no longer need a necktie, since he was done with showing up for a job. Joan knew that it was common to give a man a fancy watch upon retirement, but instead, she gave him a tide clock, to suggest a different way of dealing with time, allowing things to happen when they need to happen.

Joan's personal growth can be seen in her willingness to take her husband to see the seals. Until recently, the seal island had been a special place that represented her chance to be truly alone. Joan had good reason to want to hide the seal island from her husband, since he had not been supportive the first time she told him of her transforming experiences there. At the end of the book, Joan had grown so much that she was happy to share her inspiration with others, knowing that she could always find reserves of strength and solitude, by really living in the moment and paying attention to the world around her.

Characters

Joan Anderson

Joan Anderson is both the author and main character of this book. Joan was a writer and housewife in her fifties, who realized that she wanted to re-think her role in life. Until recently, she had always tried to be accommodating to all the people around her, becoming whatever it was they wanted her to be. Joan had always tried to be submissive and feminine, but in truth, she felt much more at home enjoying close contact with nature. She moved around a lot as a child, but she always loved the coastal area of Cape Cod, where she felt truly at home. Joan married young because she thought she was supposed to, and tried to make up for the emotional neglect and confusion about her own identity by throwing big, entertaining parties. Joan managed to run herself ragged trying to make life as vibrant and fun as possible, and trying to help her whole family have perfect lives. Joan needed to let go and stop trying to control everything, and allow others to take care of her sometimes. After a year of solitude and thinking, Joan learned how to be quieter and more relaxed, living in the moment, and seeing to her own needs. She also learned how to depend on herself, taking pride in her physical strength. She realized that she was not done with learning, and she developed more of a sense of expectation and adventure, looking forward to what life had to offer.

Joan's Husband

Joan's husband is never named, which implies that, for this narrative, he is only a peripheral character, only defined by his relationship to Joan. This is the opposite of the way Joan had seen most of their marriage, since she always felt that her husband's needs were more important, while she tried to handle the role of wife and caretaker. Joan's husband only appears at the beginning and end of the book, and pops in a couple of other times, although he plays the important role of giving the story a logical end and beginning. Joan had spent so much of her adult life defining herself in terms of her husband, that her journey of self-discovery was bounded by her initial desire for separation, and her eventual resignation to starting over with a healthier relationship. Most of Joan's husband's qualities are described in relation to her opposite qualities. While Joan was frenetic, colorful, emotional and energetic, her husband was placid, calm, safe, and logical. He gladly let Joan take most of his social responsibilities, while he hid from her party guests. Over the course of a year, however, Joan's husband also got to know himself better, and saw the ways in which his marriage had been detrimental to both of them. He realized that he needed to open up more, and saw how boring his life was when Joan was not around acting crazy and spontaneous. Although her husband refused to pay to have her hot water heater fixed, it is clear that he had a change of attitude, for he surprised her by paying to have her roof fixed. Joan's husband tried retreats and even yoga to grow himself, and he finally decided to retire and meet Joan halfway, recommitting to their marriage. He recognized that they needed to learn to be their own people, even as they supported one another.



Joan's Older Son

Joan's older son and his wife stayed with Joan for a few weeks after their Memorial Day get-together, before embarking on a long bike trip. Joan thought about how far they had to go, as young people.

Joan's Younger Son

Joan pushed both of her sons into early marriages, but she was never close with either of their wives. She was distinctly aware that her daughters-in-law had a firmer hold of her sons than she could.

Joan Erikson (Joan E.)

While Joan Anderson was walking in the fog one day, she met an old woman named Joan Erikson. Joan Erikson was very wise, and, despite her age, she still loved playing and learning.

Josh Cahoon

Joan spontaneously met Josh when she asked him to give her a boat ride out to an island covered with seals. Josh, a burly fisherman, was quite a contrast to Joan's husband.

Hazel

Hazel was a friend of Joan's who came for a visit to make sure that Joan was doing all right. Upon seeing how well Joan was doing, Hazel remarked that she wished she could make a similar journey.

Joan's Nephew

Joan's nephew was working on an independent film, and so he asked Joan to host the entire film crew for eight days, cooking for them. Joan enjoyed the chance to be involved in putting on a show.

Joan's Boss at the Fish Market

Joan's boss was at first skeptical about hiring a middle-aged woman to work in his fish market, but after a season of hard work, he surprised her with the gift of an expensive swordfish steak.

Little Red Riding Hood

Joan started out the new year by running a footrace dressed as Little Red Riding Hood, to represent the changes in her life. Red Riding Hood symbolizes the helpless, innocent feminine role that Joan had filled before this point.

Aphrodite

Aphrodite was the Ancient Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sexuality, often portrayed as a nude woman in the ocean. Joan compared herself to Aphrodite when she swam naked in the sea, which represents her reawakening sexuality.



Objects/Places

Nyack, New York

Joan and her husband had a house in Nyack, New York, which they sold at the beginning of the book.

Cape Cod Cottage

Joan decided to spend a year alone in her family's vacation cottage at Cape Cod in New England. Her husband ended up also moving in with her there.

Seal Island

One of Joan's first new experiences in her year by the sea was when she went out to spend a day alone on an island covered with seals. Eventually, Joan was willing to share this special place with her husband.

Larry's PX

Larry's PX was a fishermen's hangout, where many fishermen came to eat breakfast before a day of hard work.

Ebb Tide

Ebb tide is the phase of tide between high and low tide, a stagnant time when the water is neither rising nor falling. Joan compared a transitory time in her life to ebb tide.

Memorial Day Weekend

After months on her own, Joan once again faced playing hostess to her family over Memorial Day weekend. She found that when she tried to relax, family gatherings became much less stressful.

Joan's Husband's Retirement Party

After Joan and her husband agreed to get back together, Joan surprised him by inviting her friends for a retirement party at a bar. She wanted to show that he was entering a new phase of life.

The Fish Market

Joan got a job working in a fish market, even though she knew that she was not exactly what they were looking for. Joan got much stronger working with the heavy fish.

The Sandbar

Near Joan's seal island was a sandbar which shifted, grew, and shrank with the moving tides. Joan likened it to her life, always changing.

Joan's Room

After Joan decided to let her husband move into the cottage with her, she still kept one room apart for herself, wanting to hold on to her individuality.

Yale University

Joan and her husband met when they were both students at Yale, and Joan drove through the campus on her way to Cape Cod.

Themes

Marriage

"A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman" begins with Joan's sudden realization that she was no longer happy with her marriage, and over the course of a year-long separation, she and her husband both redefined the role of marriage in their lives. They got married very young, and Joan reflected that ". . . many of us entered marriage as only half a person, expecting to be completed by the other." (Chapter 4, Riptide, p. 46) She came to realize that a healthy marriage must be a bond between two healthy adults, who build one another up, rather than weighing one another down. This was why it was so necessary for both her and her husband to have the chance to grow beyond their traditional, limited roles.

When Joan and her husband first went their separate ways, Joan was both encouraged and discouraged by the other women who showed up to tell her that they wished they also had the guts to leave their husbands. "These celibate wives, whose marriages had grown angry and cold long ago, stood there with longing in their eyes." (Chapter 1, Ebb Tide, p. 6) Through these women, Joan was able to see the life path that waited for her if she would only stay with her husband. Joan knew that these women preferred the safety and security of their situations, but she also understood that they were living in a mockery of the loving partnership and companionship that marriage can provide. Joan saw that the only way to save her sanity, and possibly her marriage as well, was to retreat and give herself and her husband a chance to discover what they had been missing. In the end, their marriage became stronger than ever, but a major aspect of this growth was their willingness to put hard work into it. Their story shows that the Hollywood ideal of romance, which ends joyously in a wedding kiss, is a far cry from a long-lasting relationship where both partners are enriched by their connection.

Personal Growth

Part of the reason that Joan needed a year to herself was that she recognized that she had ceased her journey of personal growth, instead allowing responsibilities of marriage, family, and a vibrant social life to distract her from what was going on inside. At first, Joan felt overwhelmed and lost, not even knowing where to start, but a minister she was friends with counseled her, "You've no alternative but to simply sit still and listen. In time you'll hear the answers." (Chapter 2, The Call of the Seal, p. 19) Joan not only needed to learn how to sit still and pay attention to the world around her, but she also needed to learn to love the questions, and value the curiosity which prompted her to experience more of life. Joan's friend, Joan Erikson, also admonished her that she must always continue her journey of personal growth, saying, "There is no arriving, ever. It is all a continual becoming." (Chapter 10, Seal Woman, p. 108) This puts the emphasis of growth on the process undergone, and the lessons being learned, rather than on the finished product, a perfectly developed person. The titular reference to "An

Unfinished Woman" also emphasizes the importance of always trying to learn more and grow more, no matter how old a person is. Joan came to understand that there is no time like the present, and she made the delightful discovery that she could always try new things, no matter how old the rest of the world expects her to act. This is an inspiring lesson for readers of any age.

Getting Back to Nature

Joan, like many others, sees nature as a healing force, and so it makes sense that connection with nature played such a significant role in her personal journey. At the beginning of her time alone, which she describes as "A Year by the Sea," Joan contemplated the ways in which her life had always been like the sea at high tide, but she realized that she also needed to understand the less exciting aspects of nature, such as ebb tide, which is a boring, transitory time. Joan often looked to animals for lessons about how she should live her life, especially the seals. The seals taught her to play and live in the moment, but she also learned from other animals like clams and lobsters. While working in the fish market, Joan compared her own growth and transformation to that of a lobster, saying, "I respect the instincts of a molting lobster, hiding out while it is raw and vulnerable until it becomes tough and resilient once again." (Chapter 5, *Water Therapy*, p. 55) When Joan made her second trip out to the island of the seals, nature spoke to her even more, and Joan said, "I catch myself believing the Celtic myth that in the dark pool of a seal's eyes there are spirits that call out to certain people." (Chapter 15, *Wild and Salty*, p. 164) This calling kept Joan from remaining safely on shore, or safely within her dull marriage, because there were too many adventures out there waiting for her. The seals play the role of daring Joan to enjoy her life to the fullest, and through her time spent at the sea, she became stronger and more resilient, and came to realize that she was not nearing the end of her life.

Style

Point of View

This book is the story of how Joan went from one small, constricted point of view, to a much richer, happier viewpoint. Up until Joan's decision to separate from her husband, she had allowed herself to see life in a naive, storybook way, believing that if she could really look and act like a loving wife and mother, she could be happy living that surface-oriented role. As she began her journey alone, Joan's honest, soul-searching attitude allowed her to admit the destructive quality of the love she had lavished as a doting wife and mother, as she said in Chapter 1, Ebb Tide: "My twisted sense of loving was about giving and giving and giving until I saw the pleasure of my efforts on the other's face, so my own happiness was wrapped up in making [my husband] feel good." (Chapter 1, Ebb Tide, pp. 4-5) Joan realized that she needed to free herself from this constrained point of view, and learn about the world outside of her comfort zone.

Joan recognized the ways in which her point of view was expanding with her experience, and in Chapter 5, Water Therapy, she commented, "Being the opposite of what I was before is opening up new vistas." (Chapter 5, Water Therapy, p. 55) Joan finally could let go of her prejudices and worries about what people would think, and she began doing things she had always wanted to do since childhood, but had always known were not for her. Joan came to understand that she did not need to worry about doing what others expect, and this opened up her life to all sorts of new experiences, in the present and in the future. Joan began with the viewpoint of an old, defeated person, but she ended up feeling like a young person, excited about life's possibilities.

Setting

Although the story begins at Joan's family home in Nyack, New York, and continues through Yale University, almost everything takes place in the seaside area of Cape Cod. This area is bustling with tourists or "summer people" throughout the summer months, but after Labor Day weekend, the town is nearly empty, giving it a much quieter, more intimate feel. When Joan was examining the simple wares at her local Cape Cod general store, the selection caused her to remark, "Nothing is complicated or fancy here, just practical and friendly." (Chapter 14, Safe Harbor, p. 157) Joan realized that this relaxed, honest atmosphere was exactly what she needed in order to continue on her path of growth, and decided that Cape Cod would be her home forever. However, the book focuses much more on the beach and sea terrain than on the town and other examples of civilization. On her shoreline walks, Joan encountered all different kinds of animals, plants, and objects from the sea, and she tried to learn the lessons that each of these objects could teach her. She especially loved communing with the sea while alone on a tiny island inhabited by hundreds of seals, and she found that a driftwood fire, a sunset, and the playful calls of the seals were all the entertainment she needed.

Language and Meaning

"A Year by the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman" is written not so much like a narrative story, but takes the form of a year's worth of journal entries reflecting the real inner life of the author. Joan's writing style is straightforward and conversational, with a startling degree of honesty toward her own bad points and embarrassing flaws. She mixes new observations about the countryside and weather around her, with descriptions of what was going on inside her soul during a turbulent time in her life. Joan often quotes wise friends and speakers, identifying how old lessons applied to her life in new ways.

Joan talks a lot about what it means to be unfinished, even referring to this in the title. At first, Joan seemed to be unfinished, in that she had chosen marital and domestic dedication over other personal development. During Joan's second solitary visit to the seal island, she was wearing a T-shirt that read, "THIS IS WHAT 50 LOOKS LIKE." As Joan considered the meaning of marking life with timely milestones, she felt that the T-shirt no longer described her accurately, so she threw it into the ocean. She thought to herself that ". . . the task of the unfinished woman is to acknowledge her life as a work in progress, allowing each passage, evolution, experience to offer wisdom for her soul." (Chapter 15, *Wild and Salty*, p. 170) Of course, this lesson is not limited to women, but could offer guidance to any person who is seeking personal growth. In fact, in the next chapter, when Joan was about to be reconciled to her husband, she remarked, "I'm anticipating greeting an unfinished man, a good soul, and an old friend, all the while knowing that my future and his remain a mystery still to be unraveled." (Chapter 16, *Port of Call*, p.177) This sums up Joan's new attitude that life is a continuously unfolding adventure, limited only by the fear and laziness of individuals. In this sense, "unfinished" is more like a promise of exciting days to come, and Joan learned to be thankful for the opportunity to learn and grow more.

Structure

As indicated by the title, this book takes place over the course of a year, and each chapter makes reference to a month or holiday. It starts in September, and over the course of sixteen chapters, the book reveals ways in which Joan learned to let go of the stresses and complications of "civilized" life so she could continue growing. Although the book is arranged according to the calendar, Joan attempted to let go of time as measured by a clock, with appointments and minutes and deadlines. Instead, she tried to live life according to the timing of the tides, when events are timed according to what the earth is going to do. Joan started to learn this lesson from the seals, who all seemed to enjoy every moment, and it is appropriate that the book, which on the surface is about making a marriage work, begins and ends with the seals.

From September to November, Joan had to face her solitary situation and focus honestly on the mess she had made of her life. This was a frightening time for her, but in late November through December, she received some healing from being surrounded

by water, and found that she could interact with her estranged husband in freeing new ways. At the New Year's race, Joan thought to herself, "The day is mine, seize it or miss it altogether." (Chapter 8, *Getting My Feet Wet*, p. 87) This statement exemplified her quest to live in the moment and take every opportunity to live life to the fullest. After she finished the race, it occurred to Joan ". . . that I have just been initiated into the second half of my life, crossing the threshold of my past, heading toward unknown frontiers that will inevitably lead me to myself." (Chapter 8, *Getting My Feet Wet*, p. 90) This represents a turning point in Joan's life, when she stopped flailing helplessly, and began striding eagerly toward her future. The title of the chapter, "Getting My Feet Wet," hints at this new beginning.

From February through Memorial Day, Joan learned to share her special new discovery with the people around her, gradually easing herself back into social interaction. Over the summer, she realized how much she wanted to stay in the Cape Cod area, and she also decided to give her marriage another try, because her husband had also undergone a journey of self-discovery. In September again, she and her husband both looked forward to the lessons life still held for them.

Quotes

"I found a sort of comfort going into a marriage where my role as resident nurturer was already defined, and thought I'd fix his melancholia somehow, lifting him above the darkness he had grown so used to carrying."

Chap. 1, Ebb Tide, pp. 3-4

"'Never swim without someone watching from the shore' was always the rule; I'm breaking that one now, along with so many others."

Chap. 3, Seal Sense, p. 33

"I stopped using my body after the hopscotch period of life, avoided gym class for fear of messing up my hair, wouldn't be caught dead sweating, as it was considered unfeminine."

Chap. 8, Getting My Feet Wet, p. 86

"I just want a body that works, that is durable and resilient, that can climb a mountain, carry grandbabies on its back, be vital and energized even after a long day."

Chap. 8, Getting My Feet Wet, p. 90

"Real connection seems to happen that way—two like-minded souls meet and sniff around one another like puppy dogs, then whoosh, a moment of fission occurs, pleasantries are dropped, closely twined feelings surface, and a relationship is born."

Chap. 10, Seal Woman, p. 104

"'You know, I'm beginning to think that real growing only begins after we've done the adult things we're supposed to do.'"

Chap. 13, Treading Water, p. 145

"I'm learning that what's important is not so much what I do to make a living as who I become in the process."

Chap. 12, Low Tide, p. 132

"I have learned to pay attention to my instincts and take notice when I feel anxious—to remove the pebble from my shoe before it blisters, get the chicken bone out of my throat—in short, to be mindful of feelings and emotions and work with them, not run from them. "

Chap. 15, Wild and Salty, p. 160

"I never saw the possibilities and promises that twenty-four hours actually offer."

Chap. 15, Wild and Salty, p. 165

"A leathery tan accentuates my wrinkles, but the overall effect is handsome and hearty, a salty lady full of grit, sensitivity, and earthiness."

Chap. 16, Port of Call, p. 176



"It wasn't the marriage that needed to be terminated, rather the rote way in which we were existing within its walls."

Chap. 16, Port of Call, p.178

"The big secret is that everything doesn't happen in youth."

Chap. 16, Port of Call, p. 180

Topics for Discussion

What role does time play in the story? How is time different when measured with a clock or with the tides?

Why did Joan need to be alone? Why did she not follow her husband and continue living her life as before?

Joan realized that she could still learn new things later in life. What are some experiences that are better suited to later years in life? What experiences should only be done in youth?

What role did nature and the sea have on Joan's personal journey? How is nature a symbol for her life?

What did Joan and her husband learn about themselves and their marriage? How did they manage to save their marriage?

What did Joan learn from the seals? Have you ever learned a lesson from animals?

What do Joan's different jobs say about who she was becoming? Do you think that a person's job says a lot about who they are?

What does the title "A Year By the Sea: Thoughts of an Unfinished Woman" mean to you? How was Joan "unfinished"?