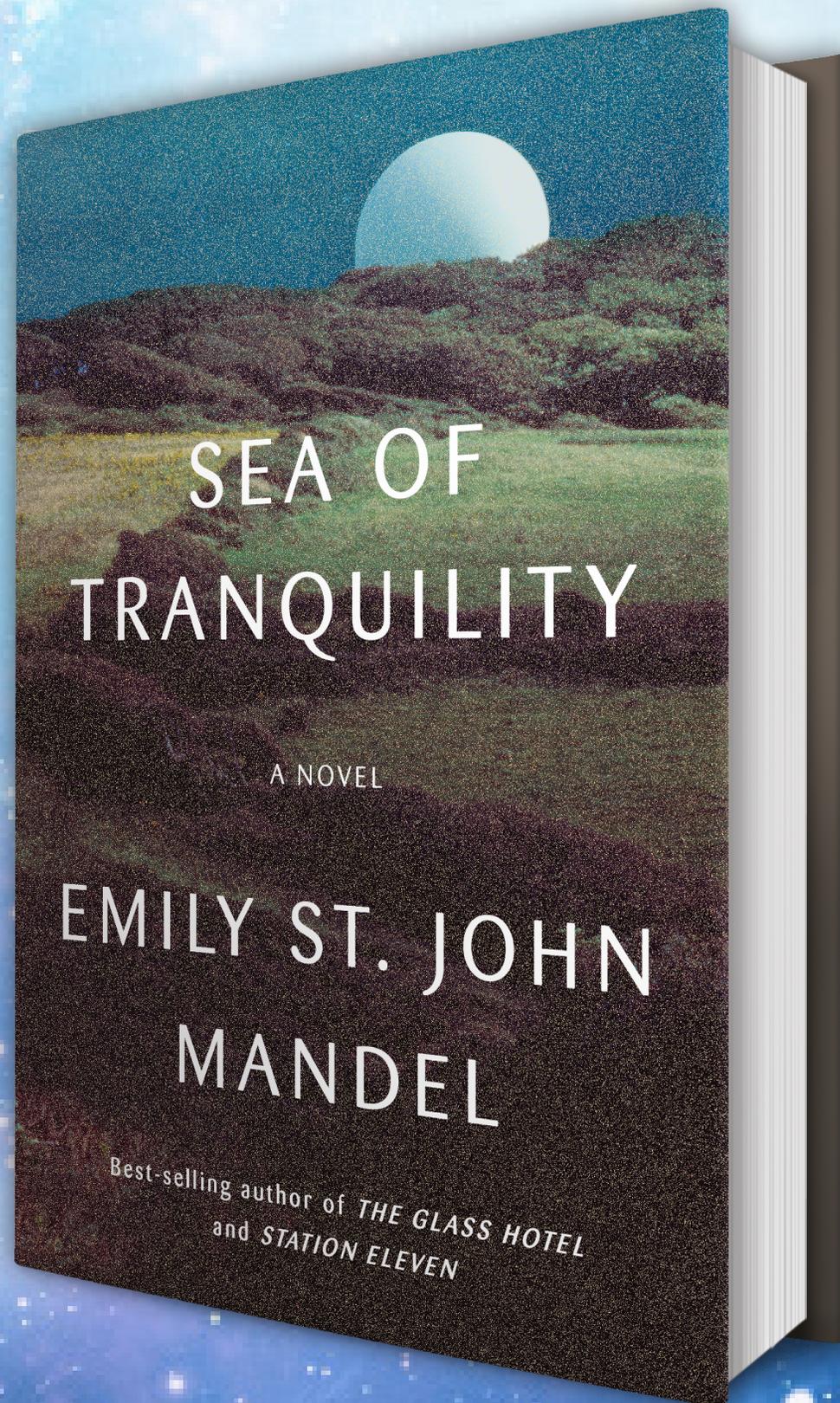


# BOOK CLUB KIT

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# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Emily St. John Mandel's *Sea of Tranquility*, a time-traveling, genre-bending novel that embraces the age of pandemics, isolation, and simulated realities. Told on an intimately human scale, this is a hopeful tale that proffers a future where art still has the power to sustain our deepest connections.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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1. What are some of the defining characteristics of society in each of the different time periods/centuries during which the novel takes place? What about how people live, work, and interact stays the same over time in this depiction of our future, and what changes?
2. Did you identify with any of the main characters in the novel—Edwin, Mirella, Gaspary, or Olive? What about their story resonated with you?
3. Does the novel offer a clear explanation with regard to Vincent's role in making the video clip from the forest?
4. If you were in Gaspary's shoes, would you have changed the past to save Olive and help Edwin? How do you think he felt about the consequences of his decisions? Did you think he did the right thing, despite the agreements of his training?
5. If you were in Olive's shoes, would you have gone back home at Gaspary's warning? What suffering and gratitude did she feel from having changed her fate?
6. Between Olive's book *Marienbad* and the violin video, which piece of art holds more of the story together? How does the prescience of one and the ambiguity of the other affect those who encounter the pieces?
7. In one of her lectures, Olive posits an alternative to the egotistical fear of our own demise: "What if it always is the end of the world?" (p. 190). In what ways does the book reaffirm that idea, especially through the ability to interfere with time?
8. How do the characters who live on the moon colonies feel about Earth? And what role does the moon play for those on Earth, especially Gaspary? How are the two "homes" for humans oppressive and/or abundant?
9. After returning from war, Edwin notes about his mother: "It wasn't her fault that the world she'd grown up in had ceased to exist" (p. 218). For which other characters is this true?
10. In what ways do colonization and its many variations stretch their influence through time in the novel? Is one form seen as more righteous or justified than others in different periods?

- 11.** Have you ever had a feeling of being “transported” in time, or an out-of-body/déjà vu experience? How do the novel’s descriptions of such moments—the flashes of light, the auras of sound, etc.—line up with your own memories or feelings?
- 12.** The sections of the book set in the future depict a world of simulation that is being talked about more in real-life scientific and philosophical circles. How does this novel’s depiction of a possibly simulated world align with your imagination of it? What do you make of the idea that “A life lived in a simulation is still a life” (p. 246)? Would you change anything about your life now if you knew it wasn’t “real”?
- 13.** Edwin’s brother’s friend Thomas offers a view of the world where mankind is meant to tame nature for the sake of civilization. How does that viewpoint play out in the novel?
- 14.** Discuss the overlaps among religion, spirituality, the supernatural, and science in this novel. How do the characters navigate those distinctions?
- 15.** What do all of the encounters with the video clip and violin have in common? What does that snippet of art do for the people who receive it, even without seeking it?
- 16.** Both Emily St. John Mandel’s novel *Station Eleven* and this novel deal with a global pandemic. In what ways do the two pandemics differ? In what ways are they similar? How do you think Mandel’s writing was affected by actually living through a global pandemic?

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

*THE HANDMAID’S TALE*  
by Margaret Atwood

*STORIES OF YOUR LIFE AND OTHERS*  
by Ted Chiang

*CLOUD CUCKOO LAND*  
by Anthony Doerr

*DUNE* by Frank Herbert

*TO THE BRIGHT EDGE OF THE WORLD*  
by Eowyn Ivey

*CRYSTAL EATERS* by Shane Jones

*STATION ELEVEN*  
by Emily St. John Mandel

*THE ROAD*  
by Cormac McCarthy

*THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE*  
by Audrey Niffenegger

*THE OPPOSITE HOUSE*  
by Helen Oyeyemi

*STATE OF WONDER*  
by Ann Patchett



# Q & A WITH EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

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## How do you see *Sea of Tranquility* in relation to your previous novels?

*Sea of Tranquility* pulls together two previous novels, *Station Eleven* and *The Glass Hotel*. I think of those three books as forming a kind of triptych, even though they all stand on their own and they're not all the same genre—*Station Eleven* was largely post-apocalyptic, while *The Glass Hotel* was set in more or less the present day, and was about ghosts and white-collar crime. Two characters from *Station Eleven* appear in *The Glass Hotel*, and several characters from *The Glass Hotel* appear in *Sea of Tranquility*. But although those books are different genres, there are common themes. I find myself returning again and again to ideas and topics that interest me—themes of travel, music, and what it means to live an honorable life.

## What drew you to make time travel part of this new novel?

The time-travel element came about because I really like time-travel fiction. *Looper* is one of my favorite movies. But the problem with time-travel narratives is that they generally fall apart if you look at them too closely, because doesn't any time travel inevitably create a loop? The only way I could make sense of a time-travel narrative was by adding another variable: the simulation hypothesis, which is the idea that we're possibly

living in a simulation. That allowed me to both gloss over and acknowledge the problem with time travel-narratives. In *Sea of Tranquility*, a character in the year 2400 says "We think we're living in a simulation because time travel works better than it should," or words to that effect.

## So this novel features an author on a book tour during a pandemic. Probably not something you ever thought you'd write about before 2020?

I started working on autofiction about an author on a long book tour a few months before the pandemic, back in late 2019. I'd wanted to write about the book tour experience for a while and I'd found autofiction to be kind of an interesting exercise but thought it might be just that—a writing exercise—and wasn't sure I'd do anything with it. Then the pandemic hit, and an interesting way to write about the awfulness of the early pandemic was to map a pandemic on to the autofiction. At the same time, an interesting way to get out of my neighborhood during lockdown was to set that autofiction a) in the distant future and b) on the moon, which is to say as far away from my apartment as humanly possible.

## What was it like having *Station Eleven* adapted for the screen?

Having *Station Eleven* adapted for screen has been an extraordinary experience. The book was optioned for screen years ago, right around the time it was published, and for a long time it seemed like nothing would happen with it. The production company that held the option was trying to make it into a movie, but it just seemed like it wasn't going to get off the ground. They kept renewing the option, which I appreciated, but I'd long since given up on the idea that it would ever happen. Then Patrick Somerville

partnered with the production company and brought the project to Paramount, which sold it to HBO Max, and suddenly the project was real. Because of Covid, I wasn't able to visit the set, which means I never saw behind the scenes and got to experience the show the same way most other people did, by watching the final version. I love what Patrick and his colleagues did. The show differs significantly from the book, but all the changes make sense to me.

## THE (UN)OFFICIAL *SEA OF TRANQUILITY* PLAYLIST

▶▶ Songs Emily St. John Mandel Listened to While Writing the Book ◀◀

1. **Dream 1**  
(before the wind blows it all away)  
Max Richter
2. **Overture De Peter Hodge Transport**  
Kyle Bobby Dunn
3. **Division**  
Moby
4. **Shot in the Back of the Head**  
Moby
5. **Rockets (featuring Inyang Bassey)**  
Moby
6. **The Haunted Ocean 1**  
Max Richter
7. **The Haunted Ocean 2**  
Max Richter
8. **The Haunted Ocean 3**  
Max Richter
9. **The Haunted Ocean 4**  
Max Richter
10. **The Haunted Ocean 5**  
Max Richter
11. **The Broken Places**  
Moby
12. **Be the One**  
Moby
13. **This Wild Darkness**  
Moby
14. **Like a Motherless Child**  
Moby
15. **Like a Motherless Child (Slow Light Mix)**  
Moby



## EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL BACKLIST CHECKLIST

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- LAST NIGHT IN MONTREAL
- THE SINGER'S GUN
- THE LOLA QUARTET
- STATION ELEVEN
- THE GLASS HOTEL



## TREAT YOURSELF TO SOME TEA!

Looking for a nice cuppa while you read? Emily St. John Mandel recommends steeping the following, collected from tea subscription company SIPS BY

- Enchanted Forest
- Chico Chai Original Chi
- Steep Society:  
A Woman's Woman  
Breakfast Tea
- Tealyra Cream  
Earl Grey Moonlight

