

# BOOK CLUB KIT

## Dog Days of Planet Earth



Theresa Shea

*“As long as I have a dog at the end of my outstretched hand, I will be okay.”*

Immediately upon his release from a 25-year prison sentence, former veterinarian Trevor Westmore gets his first surprise as a free man: a guard gives him a German shepherd puppy. While Trevor anxiously tries to build a new life, his dog Libby provides the routine and responsibility he needs to navigate his re-entry into society.

All Trevor wants is to earn a living, to stay out of trouble, and to be left alone — until he meets and falls for local veterinarian Laura Fenway. But they both have their secrets. When she learns the truth of Trevor’s past will she consider a future together? And when he discovers the lengths she’ll go to rescue dogs, will he jeopardize his long-awaited freedom?

Weaving together major environmental and political issues of the mid- to late-20th century that remain urgent today, *Dog Days of Planet Earth* asks what we’re willing to risk for our personal convictions in a world where powerful and unjust forces often oppose them.

## PRAISE FOR

### *The Shade Tree*

*“The Shade Tree* is brutally personal, heartbreakingly political – and remarkably written. Theresa Shea has combined boldness and subtlety with swaths of compassion to come up with a novel that’s both complicated and ferociously clear.”

– **JOAN BARFOOT**, Man Booker Prize, and Giller-nominated author of *Exit Lines* and *Luck*.

“Beautifully and unflinchingly written, this is a novel for our times.”

– **TERRY GAMBLE**, Author of *The Water Dancers*, *Good Family*, and *The Eulogist*

“Mesmerizing, engrossing, and brilliantly plotted, this is an achievement that will echo long after the last page is turned.”

– **HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY** (Editor’s Choice)

“Like Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Shade Tree* flourishes in a fully realized time and place. You can touch and smell the Florida oranges, see the swaying landscape from a porch swing, feel your eyes water in the stench of turpentine and tar works in the shantytown.”

– **ALBERTA VIEWS**

Dear Reader,

Now that you've read *Dog Days of Planet Earth*, you may be wondering what inspired me to write it.

For whatever reason, I have always been inspired by tragedies. I remember in my early twenties learning about atomic veterans, the upwards of 550,000 U.S. Army and Navy veterans who were exposed to dangerous levels of radiation during clean-ups and tests. Another countless number of people (and animals) were adversely impacted when fallout was carried by the wind over their communities. Had they all been lied to? If you look at a map that illustrates areas crossed by nuclear clouds from atmospheric detonations, you'll note that to some extent we are all downwinders.

There are no easy solutions to some of the issues raised in the novel; nonetheless it's worth questioning blind allegiance to government directives, restrictions to safe access to abortion, laws that criminalize activism while protecting entities that poison our land and exploit animals through factory farming, animal testing, and puppy mills (to name a few).

*Dog Days of Planet Earth* ends in 1986, but beagles are still bred for medical research today. Monkeys and other animals continue to suffer too. Furthermore, animal and environmental activists are labelled "domestic terrorists" and, if charged, face long prison sentences while those who profit from destroying life and the planet remain protected. Access to abortion is illegal and/or under threat again in North America and around the world while countries continue to wage wars and kill civilians, often targeting women and children. Needless to say, the contradictions are profoundly alarming and merit conversations.

Despite the challenging subject matter, I remain a hopeful person because, as Rebecca Solnit so beautifully reminds us, "Hope doesn't mean denying these realities. It means facing them and addressing them by remembering what else the twenty-first century has brought, including the movements, heroes, and shifts in consciousness that address these things now." Let's lean into the hope.

Thank you for choosing *Doy Days of Planet Earth* for your book club. May it spark vigorous discussion.

Until then, for all you canine lovers out there, may you always have a dog at the end of your outstretched hand.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Theresa".

Theresa Shea

Dog Days of Planet Earth



Theresa Shea

# *Dog Days of Planet Earth*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Set in post-WWII America and spanning four decades in which a former veterinarian is released after 25 years of incarceration and finds that his love for animals soon plunges him into high-stakes activism that risks his newfound freedom.

1

It is only natural, when reading a historical novel, to wonder which parts are true. What, if anything, surprised you about the historical information you learned in *Dog Days of Planet Earth*? Did you discover anything new?

2

The American invention of the atomic bomb was an unparalleled time in the history of the human species and the planet. How does Trevor's involvement at the Proving Grounds in 1951 shape his life and work?

3

In Dreiger, Trevor thinks people will appreciate him raising the alarm about pesticide spraying, but the opposite proves true. What issues today do you think people simply don't want to hear about? Why?

4

Emily implies that a relationship with Trevor is possible if he terminates her pregnancy. Do you think she was sincere? If you were Trevor, would you want to know? Do you think you would have acted differently under the circumstances?

5

Animal testing for human gains has a storied history. The anti-vivisection movement, started by those opposed to living animals being used for medical testing, dates to the 1800s. Pioneers such as Frances Power Cobbe helped to bring about the first Cruelty to Animals Act, passed in 1876. Is animal experimentation ever justified? If so, under what circumstances? How do you feel about Laura's argument to decline further treatment because of its link to animal testing?

6

Why do people like Laura and Neil take action where others remain silent and passive? Did your view of animal activists change over the course of the book? Why or why not?

7

In his book *Civil Disobedience*, Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.” Do you consider Trevor a just man? Is there an issue today where you think disobedience is the more ethical stance?

8

Benny, Otis, and Libby are vital to Trevor’s well-being. Have dogs/animals played a role in your life, or the life of someone close to you? If so, how?

9

Fiction is a powerful tool to generate empathy. Many readers who would not intentionally read non-fiction that deals with some of the disturbing subject matter in this book will go along for the ride in a novel. What kept you reading? Would you say, despite the difficult subject matter, the book is optimistic?

10

Though set in the 1950s and 1980s, many of the subjects of the novel are still relevant today. Which ones did you find have the most modern resonances?

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Theresa Shea** is the award-winning author of the novels *The Unfinished Child* and *The Shade Tree*. She enjoys creating characters who find themselves in difficult situations and seeing how things play out. Mostly, she investigates how love changes people. Born in the US and raised in Canada, she has house-trained a few dogs and raised three children. Having lived in three countries and moved many times in her life, Shea now writes full-time in Edmonton, Alberta.

