

## YOU COULD BE HAPPY HERE Q & A

### **1. Where did Lucy's character come from? Did you learn anything about yourself as you wrote her story?**

Lucy comes from all the people I've observed over the years (myself included) who think travel or moving abroad will solve their problems. People who want transformation but aren't always prepared to do the hard work of remaking themselves and of becoming supple enough for the world to work its magic on them. Lucy also comes from aspects of myself that struggle with feeling good enough. And like many of us, Lucy can sometimes be their own worst enemy.

I learned a great deal from Lucy, and I realized I had more in common with her than I cared to admit. Like Lucy, I'm always struggling to see myself and the world more clearly.

### **2. Authority of place is a definite attribute of *You Could Be Happy Here*. Your firsthand knowledge of Costa Rica comes through in the details and observations throughout the novel. When you lived there, did you feel—similar to Lucy—like an outsider? Or did you feel like Costa Rica was home?**

At a book event for *Living Abroad in Costa Rica*, my move-abroad guide, someone asked whether I felt more at home in Costa Rica or California. I said I felt more at home in California, but better in Costa Rica. My experience there helped me when I was floundering—I was reeling from a bad breakup, and I had lost faith in myself and to some extent the world. Traveling solo in an unfamiliar place, with a purpose—researching a book—helped me regain my confidence and sense of adventure, and it reminded me that the world is a big and mostly beautiful place.

But like Lucy, I felt like an outsider in Costa Rica, even after several years, and even having traveled to every nook and cranny of the country and having spoken with hundreds of people. Because of my other live-abroad experiences (in Mexico, Nigeria, Ecuador, and Ireland), feeling like an outsider wasn't unfamiliar to me. I might even say that being an outsider—even in my own country and to some extent, my family—is what feels the most familiar to me. It isn't necessarily all negative.

Lucy longs for a sense of belonging, and so do I. But for me, I'm on the fence about which I value more: a sense of belonging, or a sense of freedom. And being an outsider has its perks. For one, you can see a culture more clearly than someone enmeshed in it. And it puts into high relief the culture you grew up in, the culture that you take for granted as the norm unless you actively seek out other cultures and value systems.

### **3. Each chapter begins with Lucy's "bug notes." Did you use them as a prompt while drafting the novel, or did you arrive at the notes afterward? Were the notes curated specifically for each chapter's content?**

I wrote the bug (and bird) notes alongside the story; the one informed the other. Lucy is a science teacher, she's obsessed with insects, and she looks to the natural world to make sense of human behavior. It would have been odd NOT to feature bugs in the story, especially since Lucy has just

landed in a place with such incredible biodiversity. One square mile of Costa Rican rainforest has approximately as many insects as there are people on the planet.

So many of my fun bug facts didn't make it into the book because I didn't see an obvious parallel between them and the storyline. Like did you know that the world's insects weigh more than all the people and land animals combined? The bug notes are meant to be in dialogue with the chapters where they serve as epigraphs. For example, Chapter 10 begins with a description of bromeliad plants, which cling to trees and live off nutrients in the air. Pools of water accumulate at the center of the plant, and protozoa, frogs, and other life forms live in these impromptu ecosystems. At that point in the story, Lucy is trying hard to make sense of the town of Palmita, asking, "How long before I figure out the creatures in the pool than is Palmita?" And towards the end, when there's a town funeral, the bug notes concentrate on social insects like bees and ants, comparing how insects and human beings deal with their dead.

A note for the entomologists out there: I know that all true bugs (of the Hemiptera order, and having rigid, piercing mouth parts, like aphids and cicadas) are insects, but not all insects are bugs. Then there are the outliers, like spiders (arthropods, not insects or bugs) and lovebugs, which are in fact flies, not bugs. In my book I use "bug" colloquially, to refer to any smallish flying and crawling exoskeletal life form.

**4. Your website states that you write "fiction and nonfiction that explores family dynamics, cultural difference, and the power of place." What about these topics is so compelling to write about?**

Family configurations are so complex and fascinating, and they make us who we are. I'm still trying to figure out how my historical place in my family of origin has shaped me, and wrestling with what I want my role to be now and into the future. I also pay close attention to my family of choice, my husband and my friends. I recently read that someone's hobby was their friendships. They didn't knit or collect trolls or play the ukelele. They put their love and time into their people. Sounds like a good hobby to me!

For the cultural difference piece, I lived outside of the US for the first time when I was three years old—my father was a Peace Corps doctor in Nigeria. When I was eight, we lived in Guatemala. When I left home, I lived in Ireland for a year, then later, spent two years in Quito, Ecuador, and nearly a year in Oaxaca, Mexico. And of course I've spent many years in Costa Rica. I thank my parents for making travel and living abroad seem as natural as hopping the bus downtown, but also showing us that there's a big world out there that is nothing like the one we were born into.