

# RUINS

A NOVEL



READING  
GROUP  
GUIDE

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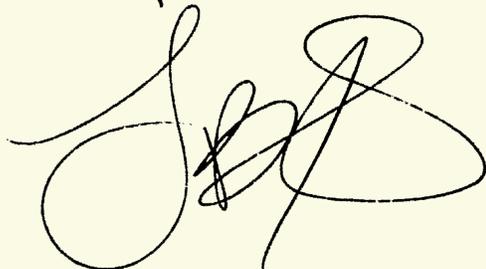
AUTHOR OF *THE LIGHT PIRATE*

DEAR READER,

IT'S HARD TO KNOW HOW TO TALK ABOUT RUINS WITHOUT SPOILING CERTAIN TWISTS & TURNS, BUT THERE IS NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT TO START TRYING!

THIS IS A NOVEL ABOUT THE SPRAWLING HISTORY OF PEOPLE WHO CAME BEFORE US, & THOSE WHO WILL COME AFTER. IT IS ABOUT BURIAL & EXCAVATION, RECORDS & ERASURE, THE STRUCTURES THAT ENDURE & THE ONES THAT CRUMBLE. IT IS ABOUT A BRILLIANTLY FLAWED WOMAN WHO IS ONLY HAPPY WITH HER HANDS IN THE DIRT & HER MIND ON THE DISTANT PAST — AN ODE TO "DIFFICULT WOMEN" EVERYWHERE. BUT MORE THAN ANYTHING, IT IS ABOUT THIS WILD PROJECT OF CIVILIZATION THAT WE ARE ALL ADDING TO, PIECE BY PIECE.

I AM SO HONORED TO SHARE RUINS WITH YOU. TIME IS A PRECIOUS RESOURCE; THANK YOU FOR GIVING THIS BOOK SOME OF YOURS.

A stylized, cursive handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to the author, Sarah L. Johnson. The signature is fluid and somewhat abstract, with large loops and a long, sweeping tail.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the idea of “ruins” permeate the novel—literally and figuratively?
2. What drives Ember? Where do you think her ambition comes from?
3. Ember’s passion for archaeology was born with the realization that “history was both a thing to be found and a thing to be made.” How does this belief relate to instances of her being dishonest or unreliable? And how does it relate to the passages of her academic writing on the role of the historic record?
4. How does Commonwealth compare to our society today? How does Ember’s hunger for exploration reflect the capitalism and colonialism we are familiar with?
5. Ember has decided she doesn’t want to be a mother. “It was as if the fact that she didn’t want to try for another child made her a monster... As if her resistance to the idea of motherhood was akin to dysfunction.” Does this condemnation of women who choose not to have children feel familiar in our own culture?
6. How might have Ember’s childhood and her relationship with her own mother affected her relentless prioritization of work over marriage/family?
7. What do the excerpts of Ish’s writing reveal about his character, health, and obsession with Ember? How do they reflect on Ember’s own obsessions?
8. The archaeologists’ mission is to unearth as much as they can about what pre-Crisis civilization looked like. What present day artifacts would reveal the most about your life, identity, and community if they were unearthed thousands of years from now?
9. When Cami falls and inadvertently finds the underground cavern, there is debate among the archaeologists over what it could be: a sewer, a crypt, an aqueduct, human transportation. What do you think it is?
10. At the end of the book, Ember surveys the dying embers of the archaeologists’ fire. What did this scene mean to you?
11. How did you think about the three sections of the book—Artifacts, Structures, and Formations? What were these archaeological concepts revealing about the themes of the book?
12. Time seems to move differently in each of the three sections. What is the duration of each chapter, and how do these units of time change over the course of the book? What is the effect on the reader?

# LILY'S BOOK RECS

