

Book Discussion/Group Guide for *The Year the Swallows Came Early*

- Discussion Questions:
- In *THE YEAR THE SWALLOWS CAME EARLY*, eleven year old Eleanor "Groovy" Robinson describes her house as a See's candy house, with perfect swirled chocolate on the outside, but sometimes hiding coconut flakes on the inside, all gritty and hard, like undercooked white rice. What does this mean? Is there anything in your life that is like this? What is it?
- How are the swallows, which return to San Juan Capistrano each year, symbolic of Frankie's mother?
- Eleanor says that certain foods remind her of special people and events. In chapter thirty-seven, she says that scrambled eggs remind her of talking to her Mama while the fog rolls in, and that Luis' tacos remind her of the swallows coming back. What foods remind you of special people or events? Why is this?
- Why is it sometimes so hard to forgive someone who has wronged to you? What does Eleanor mean in chapter thirty-four when she wishes for her father to come home even after everything he'd done, when she says that her wish felt okay, and just a little bit free, like she could finally rest?
- Why is Eleanor happy when she finds out her father gave Mr. Tom his trailer when he could have sold it to pay her the money he owed her?
- In chapter twenty-seven, why does Eleanor say Mr. Tom was like a sign trying to point her in the right direction? What does she mean by this?
- Eleanor makes up menus to match different occasions. In chapter eight, she cooks fish sticks and creamed corn to get her mama to tell her the truth about her father? Make up a menu for the last day of school. What might be on a menu for the last of summer?
- Write a poem or a short story about the swallows returning to San Juan Capistrano. For more information on the swallows, see www.missionsjc.com/swallows.html.

- Recipe to use with *The Year the Swallows Came Early*:

Eleanor Robinson's (perfected) secret recipe for
Chocolate Covered Strawberries

Ingredients:

10-15 large ripe strawberries with the stems intact (as gigantic as you can find)

8 ounces dark (semisweet) chocolate

4 ounces milk chocolate

¼ cup of shortening (Crisco)

Directions:

- Ask an adult to help you.
- Wash and dry strawberries.
- In a medium-sized saucepan (or a double boiler) on low heat, melt the dark and milk chocolate and shortening. Stir constantly.
- Using the stem as a handle, dip each strawberry into the chocolate mixture and twirl it until it is mostly and evenly covered with chocolate. Do not cover the stem part.
- Place the strawberry on a tray lined with wax paper to dry.
- Refrigerate for 30 minutes or more.
- Serve.

P.S. To draw the swallow, (like Marisol did), after your strawberries have hardened for 30 minutes in the refrigerator, melt a small amount of white chocolate (1/2 cup of white chocolate chips works well for this) mixed with a teaspoon of shortening. Dip a toothpick into the mixture while it is still warm, and let the white chocolate drip off onto your strawberry into a pattern. (It is a good idea to practice first on a napkin.) Place strawberries in refrigerator again until the chocolate is hardened.

- Project Ideas for *The Year the Swallows Came Early*:
- Make a mud nest. The swallows who migrate to San Juan Capistrano, California, from Goya, Argentina, each year build small mud nests in which to raise their babies. They also add little feathers, pieces of straw or grass, rocks, and most anything they can find that will help keep it together. Mostly, the swallows attach these mud nests to the sides of buildings, underneath bridges, or other safe places. Use a small piece of wood or other material to attach your mud nest to.
- Using a world map, trace the route of the swallows from Goya, Argentina, to San Juan Capistrano, California. How many miles do they fly across the equator each spring and fall? Use the map key and miles indicator to add up the distance. How many countries do they fly over?

- Weblinks to related subjects:

- For more information about the missions in California, see:
<http://www.californiamissions.com/>

- For more information about the swallows, see:
http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Cliff_Swallow_dtl.html

- To see a video of the swallows making a nest, see:
<http://www.nps.gov/archive/yell/tours/thismonth/june2004/cliffswallows/index.htm>