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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **Aquarium** by David Vann

#### Summary

Twelve-year-old Caitlin lives alone with her mother—a docker at the local container port—in subsidized housing next to an airport in Seattle. Each day, while she waits to be picked up after school, Caitlin visits the local aquarium to study the fish.

Gazing at the creatures within the watery depths, Caitlin accesses a shimmering universe beyond her own. When she befriends an old man at the tanks one day, who seems as enamored of the fish as she, Caitlin cracks open a dark family secret and propels her once-blissful relationship with her mother toward a precipice of terrifying consequence.

In crystalline, chiseled yet graceful prose, *Aquarium* takes us into the heart of a brave young girl whose longing for love and capacity for forgiveness transforms the damaged people around her. Relentless and heartbreaking, primal and redemptive, *Aquarium* is a transporting story from one of the best American writers of our time.

#### Discussion Questions

1. How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to get into it? How did you feel reading it – sad, disturbed, confused, bored, or something else?
2. Describe the main characters – Caitlin, her mother, Sheri, and the old man. What are their personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities?
3. Why does Caitlin relate to an aquarium? How does she relate to the old man?
4. Why does the old man befriend Caitlin? Did you question his motives?
5. Why is Sheri so abusive towards Caitlin? Can her actions be justified? How has the past shaped her life?
6. Do you admire or disapprove of Caitlin, Sheri, and the old man? Do they remind you of people you know?

7. Are the main characters dynamic -- changing or maturing by the end of the book? Do they learn about themselves, how the world works and their role in it?
8. David Vann wrote, "The book was inspired long ago by a visit to the Seattle Aquarium, when I read the descriptions of the fish at each tank. Those descriptions seemed to me a kind of poetry of human behavior told through the oddity of fish." Talk about a place you've visited that inspired you.
9. How did the illustrations affect your reading of the book?
10. If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by David Vann? If so how does this book compare? If not, does this book inspire you to read others?

Summary from the publisher.