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BACK BAY • READERS' PICK

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READING GROUP GUIDE



A SUMMER AFFAIR

*a novel by*

*Elin Hilderbrand*

A CONVERSATION WITH  
ELIN HILDERBRAND

*How much of your personal experience influences your fictional stories?*

When I was twenty-three I came from Manhattan to Nantucket, and I fell madly in love with the place and knew that I wanted to live here and never wanted to leave. So more than anything else in my writing, this island has given me endless stories, and I love setting my books here. In the case of *A Summer Affair*, Nantucket really serves as a character because it plays to the narrative of what it's like to live a secret life in a place where everyone knows you and the details of your everyday are exposed.

*What is A Summer Affair about?*

The novel is about a woman gone astray. My main character, Claire Danner Crispin, is the mother of four children and an acclaimed glassblower, and she agrees, despite the chaos in her everyday life, to take on chairing a summer charity benefit concert. So Claire becomes a sort of classic overworked, underappreciated mother and artist who is trying to fit everything in. What she ends up doing is rebelling against life and its rules, and she falls in love and has an affair with the executive director of the charity.

*Describe your life. How is it similar to Claire's? How is it different?*

People always ask me if I'm writing from real life, from real experience, and the answer is yes and no. One of the differences between Claire and me is that I have an extremely supportive spouse. My husband, Chip, is a fantastic father and a really wonderful partner. My life is similar to Claire's in that it is also very, very busy. I have three children who are eight, six, and two, and then I'm a full-time novelist. In addition to that I sit on three nonprofit boards, so my life is jam-packed.

I think it's important to a lot of women, especially mothers and wives who have so many people demanding their time and attention, that they take time for themselves. I have a wonderful relationship with my husband, I have a good sense of being a parent, but the most important thing for me to be strong is to have something for myself, and that something is my work, my writing.

*How did the story of A Summer Affair evolve? Did you know how it would end before you began writing?*

I got the idea for *A Summer Affair* because, as I mentioned, I sit on three nonprofit boards on Nantucket, and I ended up chairing five events in five years. The novel came out of my desire to write about a summer benefit. As it turned out, a summer benefit does not a novel make. . . . I discovered that the details of organizing the benefit were a good framework, but that the novel needed human intrigue to give it soul. Hence the relationship between Lock and Claire.

The trickiest part of writing about Lock and Claire was making both of them sympathetic characters who were out not to deceive their spouses but to find something inside of themselves. And more interesting to me than the relationship between Lock and Claire were the other relationships in the book — between Siobhan and Claire, say, and between Max West and Claire. Truly, this is a novel

where all kinds of relationships are explored — marriages, affairs, friendships, and past, unresolved loves.

*What was it like to chair a summer benefit on Nantucket? Was your experience similar to Claire's?*

I have sat on the board of directors of the Nantucket Boys and Girls Club since 2002. I cochaired their major summer benefit, the Summer Groove, for three years — bringing in the Beach Boys, the Temptations, and KC and the Sunshine Band. (All three events were emceed by the great Tim Russert, whom everyone at the club misses very much.) I also chaired the Summer Fete for the Nantucket Preservation Trust for two years. If I weren't a novelist, I could go into event planning. . . .

*Who is your favorite character in the novel?*

My favorite character in *A Summer Affair* is Matthew Westfield, aka Max West. This character is based on my boyfriend from high school, Michael Westwood. Mike did not go on to be a famous rock star, but he was the closest thing we had to a rock star in high school. He was in the barbershop quartet and he did make the old ladies swoon. We had a very close relationship, just like Claire and Matthew, and I am happy to say that Mike and his wife, Meg, continue to be in touch with me and my husband, Chip. If Mike has his way, I will, someday, be joining Facebook so we can communicate more frequently.

My other favorite character is Siobhan. What is not to love about Siobhan? I am a huge fan of food and wine and have explored the behind-the-scenes world of restaurants in some of my other novels. In *A Summer Affair* I took a look at the world of professional catering. I interviewed my dear pals Mark and Eithne Yelle, who own Nantucket Catering Company, and they gave me the ins and outs of how to run a successful catering business.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the character of Claire Danner Crispin. What ultimately leads her to have an affair?
2. How does the author juxtapose Claire's relationship as a young girl with Matthew "Max West" Westfield with her current relationship with Lock Dixon? How are the two loves connected, if at all?
3. Discuss the role of friendship in the novel. Which character proves to be the greatest friend by the summer's end? Does the way Claire values friendship change as a result of the gala?
4. There are several working mothers in *A Summer Affair*, including Claire and her sister-in-law, Siobhan. Discuss the ways in which the pressures of being a working mother are portrayed in the novel. Does the book's depiction of working mothers seem accurate and realistic to you?
5. *A Summer Affair* is told from multiple points of view. Who, aside from Claire, impressed you as the most compelling character? Did you find that your favorite character changed in the course of the novel?

6. Discuss the role of glassblowing in Claire's life and its importance to her identity. How does resuming her former passion affect Claire's life as a wife and mother?
7. How does the island of Nantucket act as a character in *A Summer Affair*? Discuss the tension between the island's summer residents and those who live there year-round.
8. What do you think the future holds for Claire, Siobhan, Lock, and Max? How do you think Claire will come to view the affair, and the gala, in the years to come?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elin Hilderbrand is the author of seven novels, including the celebrated bestseller *Barefoot*.

Hilderbrand lives on Nantucket with her husband and their three young children. She grew up in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, and traveled extensively before settling on Nantucket, which has been the setting for each of her novels. She holds degrees from Johns Hopkins University and the graduate fiction workshop at the University of Iowa.

For more information visit [ElinHilderbrand.net](http://ElinHilderbrand.net).

## . . . AND HER MOST RECENT NOVEL

In July 2009 Little, Brown and Company will publish Elin Hilderbrand's *The Castaways*. Following is an excerpt from the novel's opening pages.





## THE CHIEF

Because the accident occurred out on the water and not on the land that fell under his jurisdiction, it was unusual that the Chief was the first one to find out. But that was the benefit of an official position: he was a lightning rod for information, a conduit. Everything went through him first.

Dickson, his best sergeant, came into the office without his usual peppermint breeze of self-confidence. Was he sick? His skin was the color of frostbite, even though it was the first day of summer. In the seconds immediately before Dickson shuffled in, the Chief had been thinking of Greg with envy. The wind was strong; you couldn't ask for a better day to sail. Greg planned to go all the way to the Vineyard, and if he caught the gusts, he would be there in five minutes. Tess would hate it; she would be clinging to the mast or down below in the cramped head, her face as green as a bowl of pea soup.

"What's up?" the Chief said. Dickson, who had the broadest shoulders the Chief had ever seen on a human being, was hunched over. He looked like he was going to upchuck right there on the Chief's desk. He had gotten a haircut that morning, too, his summer buzz, which made his head seem square and strange, his scalp vulnerable.

“The Coast Guard just called,” Dickson said. “There’s been an accident on the water.”

“Hmmm,” the Chief said. This was the stuff of his days: accidents, crime, people fucking up in big ways and small. Mostly small, he had come to realize after seventeen years on the force.

“Chief?” Dickson said. “The MacAvoy’s are dead.”

The Chief would have called himself impossible to faze. Even on an island as privileged and idyllic as Nantucket, he had seen it all: an eight-year-old boy shot in the face by his father’s hunting rifle, a woman stabbed fifty-one times by a jealous ex-boyfriend, heroin overdoses, a Bulgarian prostitution ring, cocaine, ecstasy, moonshine, high school kids stealing diamond rings from beach cabanas, gangs, and a host of domestic disputes, including a man who broke a chair over his wife’s head. As it turned out, the Chief was right, he was impossible to faze, because when Dickson said, *The MacAvoy’s are dead*—the MacAvoy’s being Tess, Andrea’s cousin, and Greg, the closest thing to a brother or a best friend the Chief had ever had—the Chief coughed dryly into his hand. That was the extent of his initial reaction—one raspy cough.

“What?” the Chief said. His voice was barely a whisper. *What? What are you telling me?* His hands were cold and numb, and he stared at his phone. It was not reasonable, at this point, to panic, because there might have been a mistake. So many times there were mistakes, messages got crossed, people jumped to conclusions; so many times things weren’t as bad as they seemed. He could not call Andrea until he spoke to the Coast Guard and found out exactly what had happened. It was four-thirty now. Andrea would be . . . where? At the beach still, he supposed. The kids, finally, both had summer jobs, and by Memorial Day weekend Andrea had embarked on what she called “the Summer of Me.” She had been good to her word, too, doing her power walking every morning and spending the afternoons on the south shore, swimming like the Olympic Trials qualifier that she was. She was getting fit, getting tan, and exercising her mind by read-

ing all those thought-provoking novels. She tried to talk to the Chief about the novels when they climbed into bed at night, but the Chief's life was its own novel and he didn't have room in his mind for any more characters. Just yesterday he had heard Andrea on the phone with Tess, talking about her book. He had overheard words like *ambivalence* and *disenchantment*, words he had no use for.

The Chief could not raise his eyes to Dickson's about-to-puke face. He could not call his wife and drop the bomb that would destroy the landscape of her life. Her first cousin, her closest friend—a person Andrea held dearer, possibly, than himself—Tess MacAvoy, was dead.

Maybe.

"I don't know what happened," Dickson said. The Chief couldn't look at him or the haircut so short it seemed painful. "They just called to say there was an accident. And the MacAvoy's are dead."

## ADDISON

Addison Wheeler was having cocktails at the Galley with clients. It was a celebration, and Addison had ordered a bottle of Cristal. A purchase-and-sale agreement had just been signed for a \$9.2 million waterfront home on Polpis Harbor. But even as Addison was sipping champagne, even as he was mentally spending his whopping commission, his eyes scanned the whitecaps that frosted Nantucket Sound. The restaurant had plastic siding to protect diners from the wind, which was driving out of the north. There were boats out on the water, a lot of boats, despite the six- to eight-foot seas. Was one of them Greg and Tess's? They would have made it to the Vineyard by one or two, and now would

be returning home. Unless, of course, they had decided to spend the night. Addison would have said he was beyond this kind of jealousy, this kind of obsession, but he was feeling both things, jealousy and a panicky obsession. If Tess and Greg stayed on the Vineyard, in a room at the Charlotte Inn, would they make love? Addison sipped his champagne. Of course they would. Today was their twelfth anniversary.

He had tried to call her no fewer than five times before she left, but she didn't answer.

There were many indications that the day was special. They were taking champagne and a picnic that Andrea had prepared for them as a gift. Greg was bringing his guitar. He had stopped by Addison's office that morning on his way to the dock.

"Your guitar?" Addison said.

"I'm a better singer than I am a sailor," Greg said. He shook his head to get his floppy bangs out of his face, a gesture that made Addison shudder. "I wrote her a song."

Wrote her a song. He would play the troubadour, try to win Tess back. After all that had happened last fall, Greg needed to make Tess trust him again.

"Good luck with that," Addison said.

The final time Addison called Tess, he left a message. *Are you going to tell him? Are you going to tell him you love me?* The question was met with electronic silence.

The maître d' caught his eye. Addison tilted his head. His clients were talking between themselves now, awkwardly, about the quality of the champagne, and about the water, the impressive wind. It would sweep Greg and Tess to the Vineyard, but they would have to come back in the teeth of it. Would they risk it? If they spent the night at the Charlotte Inn, Addison would lose his mind. The place was too romantic, with its pencil post bed, white grand piano, towel warmer, silver buckets filled with blooming roses. Addison had stayed at the Charlotte Inn with his first wife twenty years ago, and he remembered that the hotel had had the

magical power to improve their relationship, for the nights they stayed there, certainly, and for several days afterward. Addison did not want Greg and Tess to stay there, because what if they experienced the same balm? He reached into his pocket to touch the heart Tess had given him on his birthday. She had cut the heart out of red felt, using child's scissors. Addison treated it like a talisman, though he was far too old and reasonable to believe in such things. He fingered the heart—now grotty and pilled and dangerously close to ripping—and wondered if Tess was thinking about him. Would she have the courage to tell Greg? Addison could hope all he wanted, but he knew the answer was no. Never in a million years.

The wife of the client couple asked Addison a question, but he didn't hear it. He was dropping the ball conversationally; he had to get back into the game, \$9.2 million, and his office had the listing as well as the buyer. This was the biggest deal of the year so far. But something was going on at the front of the restaurant. Was the maître d' signaling him? He wanted Addison's attention?

"Excuse me," Addison said. He stood up, forced a smile. "I'll be right back."

Phoebe was in the parking lot. It *was* Phoebe, right? There was her car, the red Triumph Spitfire, and there was a woman Phoebe's shape and size with the shining blond hair—but her face was pink and crumpled like a dropped handkerchief, her cheeks were streaked with makeup, she was keening, hiccupping, *freaking out*. Losing her shit, here in public! This was not his wife. His wife, Phoebe Wheeler, rarely cracked a smile or shed a tear. Addison grabbed her by the shoulders. Was it really her? Yes, those eyes, blue fire. She was emotionally absent, a woman made of ice, steel, chalk, plastic, stone, rubber, clay, straw, but her eyes revealed a spark, and that was one reason Addison hung in there. He was convinced she would return to him one day.

"Phoebe?" he said.

She pushed him away. She was making noises like an animal; her beautiful hair fell into her face. She was trying to speak, but she could not form any coherent words. Well, there was one word, over and over again, like a hiss: *Tess*.

“Tess?” Addison said. Did Phoebe know, then? She’d found out? This was impossible, because no one knew and there was not one scrap of evidence that would betray them. The cell phone bill, maybe, but only if Phoebe had gone through it with a fine-tooth comb and seen the calls that Addison had made to Tess while he was visiting his daughter two weeks ago in California. Yes, that must be it. Addison’s heart cracked and sizzled like an egg on the hot griddle of the parking lot. He could explain away the phone calls; he and Tess were, after all, friends. He could come up with a plausible reason for the calls.

“Honey, you have to get ahold of yourself,” Addison said. He could not believe his marriage was going to explode here, now, when he was completely unprepared—but a part of him was intrigued by Phoebe’s unbridled reaction. She was hysterical. He couldn’t believe it. He would have said that when Phoebe found out about Tess, she would do nothing more than roll over and sneeze.

Just like that, her meds kicked in. She reined in the horses that were running away with her. She stopped crying; she sniffed. Addison had seen her crumble like this only one other time—September 11. Her twin brother, Reed, had worked on the hundred and first floor of the second tower. He had jumped.

“Tess,” Phoebe said. “And Greg. Tess and Greg are dead.”

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