
BACK BAY • READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

Summerland

A novel by

Elin Hilderbrand

Musings on an American Summer

by Elin Hilderbrand

Hot, sunny beach days, the crash of waves on the shore, corn on the cob, watermelon, blueberry pie, starry nights, bonfires, outdoor showers, a tidal pool filled with hermit crabs, a walk out to the end of the dock, the crack of the bat at the ball field, falling asleep by the pool with a book spread open on your chest—these are some of my favorite images of that elusive and evanescent thing called an American Summer.

I was first introduced to the idea of the summertime as something special when I was ten years old, the first time my father and stepmother rented a house for the month of July on Cape Cod. Our blended family, which included five children, of which my twin brother and I were the eldest, went to the Cape for seven straight summers, and this was where I developed my affinity for collecting beach glass and swimming out to the wooden raft and having “cocktail hours” on the screened-in porch that included Shirley Temples and shrimp cocktail. We played miniature golf, we went out for ice cream, we walked the beach before breakfast, we went to bed with sand in the sheets. It was, every second of it, heaven. My father was killed in a plane crash when I was sixteen, and those idyllic summer vacations ended. In fact, most of what was happy in my life ended at that point. The summer I was seventeen, I worked in a factory that made Halloween costumes. I ate

brown-bag lunches and spent my free nights at the shopping mall. I didn't see the ocean even once. I was miserable. Thus started a quest of sorts...how could I regain my American Summer? It was, in so many ways, all I wanted. I decided the first thing I needed was a job where I would have the summer free...and so after college, and nearly a year in Manhattan working in an office, I secured a position teaching middle-school English. I had the summer off. I was free to live at the beach! I chose Nantucket because I wanted an island, someplace authentic, someplace storied, someplace literary. And to paraphrase John Denver, when I arrived on Steamship Wharf in July of 1993, it was like coming home to a place I'd never been before. I had found my place in the world. I had found my American Summer.

Once again I had an endless string of sultry days when I would ride my bike to the beach and stop at the fish store on the way home to buy oysters and mussels, and swordfish to grill for dinner. I had a boyfriend who would pick me up in his Jeep and take me out to the west end of the island to watch the sunset. I never wanted that summer to end.

But as we all know, summer always ends. August draws to a close, the crowds thin after Labor Day, people start thinking about work and back-to-school and football tailgates. After two idyllic years on Nantucket, I headed out to the University of Iowa to attend the prestigious and competitive Writers' Workshop. I wanted to be a novelist, and Iowa was the best graduate fiction writing program in the country.

What I didn't anticipate was how difficult I would find living in the Midwest. I was separated not only from my new husband (for I had married the boyfriend with the Jeep), but also from the ocean and the island I had fallen in love with.

I was miserable at Iowa. I cried nonstop; I was a regular at the free therapy sessions on campus; I spent thousands of dollars I didn't have on my long-distance phone bill and plane trips back

east. But then, at some point, I had a revelation: I would write about Nantucket, and writing about the place that had become so dear to me would be my catharsis. In the spring of 1997, I started my first novel, *The Beach Club*.

In the intervening years, I have written eleven novels, all of them set on Nantucket. They have been called “beach books,” and “great summer reads.” At first, I bristled at the designation. After all, each novel is a creation of mine, no less precious than a child, and I strove to make each one meaningful and relevant, and to create characters that people would remember long after they put the book down. However, what I have learned is that my most important character is the island itself, Nantucket. (And indeed, in my new novel, *Summerland*, “Nantucket” is an actual character, speaking out as a Greek chorus might.)

I have found that what my readers love the most is what I, too, would have loved if I had read these novels, say, during my sad, difficult seventeen-year-old summer. My novels capture the essence of an American summer. I like to think that even my readers who are riding the subway to work on Wall Street, or who are forced to seek summer solace in the air-conditioned shopping mall, still get to experience that golden feeling one gets while lying on the beach without a care in the world. They get to experience a little piece of American Summer.

Elin Hilderbrand in conversation with her editor, Reagan Arthur

RA: It's not every editor and author who were once colleagues. You and I first met when we were both editorial assistants at St. Martin's Press. I remember you primarily as a high-energy blond blur who suddenly was leaving us for the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Did your brief time in the publishing trenches help you as an author, do you think?

EH: I remember you, Reagan, from St. Martin's, as one of the rising superstars [ed. note: she exaggerates]. I remember that you loved Ellen Gilchrist, and then in an attempt to copy you, I started reading Ellen Gilchrist and read everything she wrote over the next year and a half. Did I learn anything about being a writer from working in publishing? Not really. I still don't know how to read a royalty statement.

I know "where do you get your ideas" is the writer's most dreaded question, but do you have a running list of future plot ideas? Do they come to you unexpectedly out of the blue or from a headline or from a real-life situation?

My ideas come from a mystical well, thank God. Sometimes I think thematically: "I really want to write a novel set on Tuckernuck..." or "I really want to write about a family wedding on Nantucket." And sometimes I'm struck by a 'what if': What if a couple died on a sailboat and they were part of a really tight-knit group of friends and the friends all blamed themselves for various reasons?

Talk a bit about your writing process—you have, to put it mildly, a very busy and active life. How do you carve out the time for writing, and is there a particular place or time you've found work best for you?

My writing life has evolved. A book a year is grueling, when it also includes raising three children, promoting a book, and enjoying the kind of ridiculous social life that I do. I do a couple of things for myself to make my life easier. The fact of the matter is that I do my best work when I am alone, and by alone I mean alone alone. This past year, I spent five weeks on St. John by myself composing, and I spent seven to eight weeks in Boston revising. In between, it's a battle between writing and life. It is, as with any working mother, a balancing act. The winter is kinder to me, but my favorite writing hours are the summer days when I pack a lunch, get on my bike, and ride to the beach to write.

Although you seem as established as any native, you did not grow up on Nantucket. Do you think coming to it as an “outsider” informs the way you look at and write about the island?

I am technically a “wash-ashore”—meaning I was not born or raised on Nantucket. However, after nineteen years, I am most certainly considered a local. My three children were born here, and they go to the public schools. I sit and have sat on numerous boards—including the Nantucket Boys & Girls Club, the Nantucket Preservation Trust, Friends of Nantucket Public Schools, and Nantucket Little League. I think it's likely that, as someone who discovered Nantucket as an adult, I appreciate its beauty and uniqueness more than people who grew up here—my children, for example. I try to explain that I grew up two hours from the beach. My young life did not include beach picnics with sparklers, or my mother driving me out to surf at six a.m. I did not ride my bike to the Nantucket Yacht Club and sign for my BLT and then go for my tennis lesson. I did not learn to handle a thirteen-foot Boston Whaler at the age of twelve.

You're a voracious reader. I assume this was true of you as a child—is there any one book you remember reading that made you think "I can do that" or "I want to try that"?

I read constantly as a child. All of Nancy Drew...such that I started writing my own series called "Rachel and Gretchen," about twin girls who had varied adventures. ("Rachel and Gretchen Fly to the Moon," "Rachel and Gretchen Make their Parents Breakfast in Bed.") The formative books for me were predictable—*A Little Princess*, and *Little Women*. I loved the Great Brain series. When I was a teenager, I read John Cheever's stories and J.D. Salinger, and that was all it took—I was determined to be a writer.

And when you read now, are you able to take off your writer's hat and read for pure pleasure, or do you find yourself making mental notes about an author's technique or style?

Now, I read constantly, incessantly...but slowly. One book at a time, always, and I always finish. Think about the mindset it takes to plow through writing a book; I bring that same work ethic/philosophy to my reading. For me, reading is working. It's impossible to read anything without learning something about myself and my own writing. I try to read the best, most interesting stuff out there—normally always fiction, normally always contemporary, although I do go back and read the classics. Here's the way I feel about a really good book: If my day stinks, it's okay, because I know that when I have downtime, I will be reading and the reading will be good and that will salvage my day.

"If I weren't a writer, I'd want to be _____."

An anchorperson on ESPN SportsCenter.

"If I didn't live on Nantucket, I'd want to live _____."

In the West Village, preferably on Bleecker between Charles and Perry.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. What do you think of the use of Nantucket's collective voice in *Summerland*? How does the island—and the voice of its people—play its own role in the novel?
2. Following the tragic accident, Jordan decides to move his family to Australia for a year, even though Jake does not want to leave the island. For whom did Jordan make that decision? Why?
3. How would you describe Penny's relationship with Ava? Should Ava have realized something more serious was wrong with Penny? What did Ava provide Penny that no one else could?
4. What do you think of Jordan's decision not to run a story about the accident in the *Nantucket Standard*? Do you think he made the right choice?
5. Throughout the novel, many characters struggle with guilt over the cause of the car accident, including Demeter and Jake. Do you think Penny was solely responsible for the accident? Or was anyone else at fault? Why or why not?

6. Penny had a very sensitive soul. What did she struggle with? Was she determined to end her life?
7. Perth and Nantucket are both coastal towns, but they are a world apart. How does life differ in these two places? What do Jordan and Jake learn from their time in Perth?
8. What caused Demeter to start drinking in an unhealthy way? What led her to continue her drinking, and what were the consequences?
9. What sparked Ava's reawakening, and what led to her big decisions at the end of the novel?
10. What do you think of Hobby's decision to keep Demeter's secret news to himself? Do you think that's something he should have shared with others?
11. How are the lives of the parents in the novel influenced by the lives of their children — and vice versa?
12. How does each character in *Summerland* find a way to start healing as the summer draws to a close?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ELIN HILDERBRAND: novelist, mother of three, sports enthusiast, avid fan of Bruce Springsteen, Veuve Clicquot, and four-inch heels. She sits on the Board of Directors at the Nantucket Boys & Girls Club and Nantucket Little League. Her resting pulse is 65.

. . . AND HER MOST RECENT NOVEL

IN JUNE 2013 Reagan Arthur Books will publish Elin Hilderbrand's *Beautiful Day*. Following is an excerpt from the novel's opening pages.

THURSDAY

Margot

Jenna looked so happy.

They were on the ferry, the hulking white steamship that was properly named *The Eagle*, but which Margot had always thought of as *Moby Dick*, because that was what their mother used to call it. Every year when the Carmichael family drove their Ford Country Squire into the darkened hold of the boat, Beth used to say it was like being swallowed by a whale. She had found the ride on the steamship romantic, literary, and possibly also biblical (she would have been thinking of Jonah, right?)—but Margot had despised the ferry ride then, and she despised it now. The thick, swirling fumes from the engines made her queasy, as did the lurching motion. For this trip, Margot had taken the Dramamine that Jenna offered her in Hyannis. Really, with the seven thousand details of her wedding to triage, the fact that Jenna had remembered to pack pills for her sister's seasickness was astonishing, but that was Jenna for you. She was thoughtful, nearly to a fault. She was, Margot thought with no small amount of envy, exactly like their mother.

Margot pretended the Dramamine was working for Jenna's

sake. She pulled down the brim of her straw hat against the hot July sun, which was blinding when reflected off the surface of the water. The last thing she wanted was to freckle right before the wedding. They were outside, on the upper deck. Jenna and her best friend, Finn Beckett Sullivan-Walker, were posing against the railing at the bow of the boat. Nantucket was just a smudge on the horizon; even Christopher Columbus might not have said for sure there was land ahead, but Jenna was adamant that Margot take a picture of her and Finn Beckett, with their blond hair blowing about them, as soon as Nantucket was visible in the background.

Margot planted her feet at shoulder width to steady herself against the gentle yet nefarious rocking of the boat and raised the camera. Her sister looked happy. She looked excited-happy that this was the start of her wedding weekend, which was certain to be the most fun-filled and memorable weekend of her life (!!!)—and she also looked contented-happy, because she was confident that marrying Stuart James Graham was her life's mission. Stuart was the One.

In the year and change since Stuart had proposed (on a park bench across the street from Nightingale-Bamford, where Jenna taught first grade, on the last day of school, presenting a 2.5-carat diamond in a platinum Tiffany setting that had once belonged to his grandmother), Margot had cast herself as devil's advocate to Jenna's vision of lifetime happiness with Stuart. Marriage was the worst idea in all of civilization, Margot said. For two people to meet when they were young and decide to spend the rest of their lives together was unnatural, Margot said, because everyone knew that humans changed as they got older and what were the chances—honestly, *what* were the *chances*—that two people would evolve in ways that were compatible?

“Listen,” Margot had said one evening when it was just her and Jenna having drinks at Cafe Gitane in Soho. “You like having sex with Stuart now. But imagine doing it four thousand times. You’ll

lose interest, I promise you. You'll grow sick of it. And the enthusiasm that you used to have for having sex with Stuart will migrate—against your will—to something else. You'll develop an unhealthy interest in cultivating orchids. You'll be *that* mother on the baseball field, harassing the umpire over every pitch that crosses the plate. You'll start flirting with your personal trainer, or the barista at Starbucks, and the flirting will turn into fantasies and the fantasies will become a fling, then perhaps a full-blown affair, and Stuart will find out by checking your cell phone records, and your life will be ruined, your reputation will end up in shreds, and your children will require expensive therapy." Margot paused to sip her sauvignon blanc. "Don't get married."

Jenna had stared at her levelly. Or almost. Margot thought that this time, maybe, somewhere deep inside those sapphire-blue eyes, she detected a flicker of worry.

"Shut up," Jenna said. "You're just saying that because you're divorced."

"Everyone is divorced," Margot said. "We owe our very livelihood to the fact that *everyone is divorced*. It put food on the table, it paid for our orthodontia, it sent us to college." Margot paused again, more wine. She was under the gun to get her point across. It was nearly seven o'clock and her kids were home without a babysitter. At twelve years old, Drum Jr. was okay to be left in charge until it got dark, then he would freak out and start blowing up Margot's phone. "Divorce, Jenna, is paying for your wedding."

Margot was referring to the fact that their father, Douglas Carmichael, was the managing partner in a very successful family law practice in midtown Manhattan. Technically, Margot knew, Jenna would have to agree with her: Divorce had always paid for everything.

"Shut up," Jenna said again. "Just shut the eff up. You're not going to talk me out of it. I love Stuart."

"Love dies," Margot said, and she snatched up the bill.

ALSO BY ELIN HILDERBRAND

Barefoot

“Settle back and prepare to be charmed. . . . Hilderbrand’s women move in and out of passion, rivalry, and solidarity in one unforgettable summer, finally reaching that state of wonder and gratitude that comes with sheer survival.”

—Susan Larson, *New Orleans Time-Picayune*

“It’s *Beaches* meets *The Graduate*.” —*Self*

A Summer Affair

“Claire has it all—and then she gets *more!* Will new love destroy her great life? *A Summer Affair* is voyeuristic fun.” —*People*

“A perfect summer cocktail of sex, sun, and scandal.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

Silver Girl

“A perfect setting for our times. . . . Watching Meredith remember the things that made her who she was and the woman she will have to become makes for an enjoyable read.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“A sensitive and suspenseful tale. . . . Another winner from Elin Hilderbrand.” —*Booklist*



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ALSO BY ELIN HILDERBRAND

The Castaways

“Hilderbrand provides the perfect summer read as she explores love, loss, and, ultimately, absolution.”

—Patty Engelmann, *Booklist*

“*The Castaways* is a sensitive portrayal of the complexities of friendship. Hilderbrand’s characters illustrate the alliances, insecurities, and joys that color adult relationships. . . . When it’s done well, as it is here, reading about other people’s problems is ever so satisfying.”

—Kristi Lanier, *Washington Post*

The Island

“Wildly successful. . . . As escapist beach reads go, Hilderbrand’s latest is consistently smarter and more compelling than it needs to be. This tale of a middle-aged divorcée’s monthlong sojourn on tiny, rustic Tuckernuck Island with her art-world sister and two troubled daughters zips along with the kind of well-limned romantic drama that keeps poolside readers out of the water for hours.”

—Leah Greenblatt, *Entertainment Weekly*

“Juicy. . . . Elin Hilderbrand has the romantic drama down.”

—*People*



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