

# **A Summer to Die Study Guide**

## **A Summer to Die by Lois Lowry**

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# Plot Summary

A Summer to Die by Lois Lowry tells the story of thirteen-year-old Meg Chalmers whose whole life is turned upside down when her parents, Charles and Lydia Chalmers, tell her and her fifteen-year-old sister, Molly, that they will be closing up their family home in the small New England town where they live and moving to a country farmhouse. The girls are shocked, especially Meg who is shyer and more reserved than her popular and beautiful older sister. Meg has lived in their house her entire life. The girls are not happy that they will be leaving behind their school and their friends. But there is a silver lining, they will only have to live on the farm for a year while Charles finishes the book he is writing. He is a university professor and the school is giving him the year off to complete the important work.

One of the biggest disappointments in the new house is that Meg and Molly will have to share a bedroom. The situation causes some conflicts immediately because Molly is always as neat as a pin and Meg is on the messy side. There are other differences between the girls. Molly is beautiful and popular and no one can remember when she didn't have a boyfriend. Meg is shy and studious and does well at school scholastically but not socially. She envies her beautiful sister although she does like being smart and different. Molly wants to get married young and have six children. Meg has never even thought of marriage. She wants to be a writer or an artist or a photographer. Molly gets so upset with Meg's bad housekeeping that she draws a chalk line down the center of the room and dares Meg to cross over to her side.

Despite their differences, the girls do love and care for each other. Molly encourages Meg in her pursuits. She thinks Meg is especially talented in photography. Molly adjusts to the new school and within a month she's a cheerleader, has made a lot of new friends and has a cute boyfriend. The only notable thing that happens to Meg is that a boy in her class starts calling her Nutmeg and it sticks. Meg ventures out in the field one day and comes across an old man working on his truck in front of a small house. As it turns out it is Will Banks, the kind and gentle 70-year-old widower who owns the land and the houses on it. Meg and Will hit it off and become friends. In fact, she gets him interested in photography.

A young couple, Ben and Maria, rent one of the other houses on the land. They become good friends with Meg and Molly. Maria is expecting their first child and Molly is thrilled at the prospect. Molly falls ill with the flu in the middle of winter and experiences quite a few nosebleeds. But the nosebleeds don't stop and Molly has to be taken to the hospital. Molly stays in the hospital for an extended period while she undergoes a battery of tests. When she returns home, she is pale and thinner and her beautiful blond hair is falling out.

Charles and Lydia don't tell Meg just how bad Molly's condition really is. She continues to deteriorate and even though there are many signs that Molly is fading, Meg assumes she'll be fine and recover. Molly does not respond to the medications she is given and must be rushed to the hospital again one day. She never returns. Although Meg misses



her sister and her life will never be the same, there is new life in the neighborhood. Maria has a baby boy and Meg is allowed to photograph it while it is being born. And she is also the first to hold it. There is new life in Will, too. He becomes so skilled at photography that his photos are featured in an exhibit in the university museum.

When Meg walks through the forest with Will to see a flower that is the last to bloom in the season, she pictures her beautiful sister in the tall grass, gathering wild flowers. Will wanted to show Meg that special flower because like she, it was a late bloomer.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Molly takes a piece of white chalk and draws a line across the carpet, up the wall on one side and then on the other. She tells Meg that she can be a slob on her side of the room and not to cross the line over to her side. Molly is prettier than Meg but Meg is smarter. Meg wants to become important someday. All Molly wants is to be Mrs. Somebody and have lots of kids. The sisters are very different in other ways: Molly is easy going and confident while Meg is unsure and impetuous.

It is difficult for Molly to share a room with Meg. She can't shed a tear if she feels like it without a having to give her sister a big explanation. And when she is trying to write a poem, she can't say the words out loud to see how they sound. When they had lived in town, they each had had their own room. She had liked living across from the high brick tower that sounded its clock every hour. In the country, the only sound Meg hears at night is Molly breathing.

The family moves to the country so their father, Dr. Charles Chalmers, can finish writing his book. The university has given him a year to complete it. But staying in town hadn't been working. His students kept dropping by to see him and distracted him from his writing. He could never turn them away although Mrs. Chalmers had tried to discourage them. The book Dr. Chalmers is writing is entitled, "The Dialectic Synthesis of Irony." He tries to explain what the book is about but Meg doesn't get it. Molly claims she does but Meg doesn't believe her.

Just before Thanksgiving, their mother, Lydia, tells them that they are moving to the country so their father can finish his book. They'll be moving to an old farm house that was built in 1840. She promises they'll have a vegetable garden in the summer. Meg has spent her entire life, all thirteen years, at their house. The prospect of permanently moving to the country doesn't sit well with her. Worse yet, the girls will have to change schools.

Molly is upset about moving because she has just been named cheerleader at her school. Meg is upset because she'll have to quit her weekend art and photography classes. Their father tells fifteen-year-old Molly that cheerleading is not a priority. Molly has to give her new cheerleader outfit away to a sub who tries to hide her glee that Molly is moving away. At least Meg gets to pack her paints and camera and bring them with her.

Molly does well at the new school, the Macwahoc Valley Consolidated School. She makes new friends, has a boyfriend and is named a substitute cheerleader all in a matter of a month. The first day in school, when Meg tells the teacher she prefers being called "Meg" as opposed to Margaret, one of the boys dubs her "Nutmeg" and the nickname sticks.



There are other problems living in the old house other than just the lack of privacy. There is also a lack of closet space and other places to go hide. Charles explains that the old house is designed to provide the best natural heat possible since there had been no central heating at the time it was built. When she first sees the house, she is glad to see there are three bedrooms. She figures she'll get the small room in the middle of two larger rooms on the second floor. She is disappointed when her mother tells her that the small room would be her father's study so he could have some solitude for writing his book. Just two days before Christmas, they are settled in and the house is warm and cozy from its fireplaces. Her mother is making pies and cookies and her sister is adamant that Meg not cross the line in the middle of their room.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

At a very tender age, Meg Chalmers is forced to leave the only house she's ever known and her school to move to an old country house. Her father is writing a book and needs to have solitude in order to finish it. Meg wants to be something when she grows up. She is struggling to find out who she is. She is hurt that she has to give up her pursuits of art and photography. Meg is a sensitive young girl who likes the arts. She mentions attempting to write poetry. Sharing a room with her sister who is nothing like her is difficult. It is telling that she mentions not being able to shed a tear in privacy which appears to be a foreshadowing of problems or fears that she has about her life and future.

Meg's parents seem to gloss over the move that is probably traumatic for their daughters. They tell their daughters that the new school is great and that the new house is charming. It seems they don't ask the girls how they feel about such a huge change in their lives. When she arrives not only does Meg realize that she has left her friends, home and school behind, she loses her privacy because she must share a room with her older sister. At first, it seems the move is a lose-lose for Meg.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Things seem to be going better at the new house. Lydia is very happy—although she always puts on a happy face no matter what the situation. Molly and her mother are a lot alike. When they seem excited about something, it usually turns out not to be anything extraordinary. Meg's father is making a lot of progress on his book. He writes the entire time Molly and Meg are gone to school and rarely takes a break. Meg takes comfort in the sounds that come from the room—his typing, the crumpling up of sheets of paper and his frequent mumbling to himself.

Lydia decides to make a patchwork quilt from scraps of the material from dresses Meg and Molly had worn as little kids. It recalls to Meg her younger days. Meg notices the look on her mother's face when her father seems to be inspired about a passage in his book. The look she gives him is probably the same one she had given him when they had been young students together. Lydia has that same loving look for Meg even although Meg had been a "difficult" child, always ready to debate and disagree. With Molly, it is different. Lydia and Molly are so much alike. Meg guesses that when Lydia looks at Molly, it is like looking at herself when she was young.

Molly has a boyfriend—but she has always had a boyfriend as long as Meg can remember. Molly is so beautiful that it even catches Meg off guard sometimes. Her new boyfriend, Tierney McGoldrick, is a basketball player and president of the junior class. Because they are in the country, they can't really date but he is constantly at her side at school and he calls her every night.

Meg makes a new friend, too. She goes on a walk one day with her camera and finds an old abandoned house. The snow is too deep for Meg to get very close to the building. The house is old and weathered but seems to be of sound construction. She feels inspired and takes a few pictures of it. She walks farther down the path and comes to another small house where a man is working on his truck. She says hello to him and he responds in a very friendly manner. The man knows that her name is Chalmers. She tells him her name is Meg which he knows is short for Margaret because that was his wife's name.

The man introduces himself as Will Banks. He invites her in for a cup of hot tea. She had always been taught to never talk to strangers—much less go alone into their houses. She can imagine how upset her mother would be but she trusts him and he assures her that at seventy, he is harmless. The house is beautiful inside—something she would have created in a painting. She is impressed that the painting hanging over the fireplace is a real painting. The house is small but in perfect condition and order.

Will asks Meg if she has taken the small upstairs bedroom. He knows the layout of the house. As it turns out, the little room had been his when he was a small boy. He tells her



to look for his initials that he had carved inside the closet in that room. Will's grandfather had built the house. It had been the family house which he had taken as his own when he married Margaret who was just eighteen when they married. He and Margaret had had no children. Only a nephew is left to continue the family. But the nephew is quite another story. The other abandoned house that Meg had photographed also belongs to Will. He had known the house Meg and her family are living in would be a good place for her father to write since it offers quiet and solitude and had been happy to rent it to them.

Will says he is rarely lonely. He has his dogs and books. But it is nice to meet a new friend like Meg, especially since she is so beautiful. He agrees to let her take his picture. She winds up taking a whole roll of pictures of him.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Meg feels isolated not only because she is so different from her sister and her mother. They're very much alike. She has always felt some distance from them. Molly is beautiful and has an easy going personality and Lydia was probably just like her when she was young. It's easy for Molly to make friends and fit in. Meg finds it more difficult. She's an introspective person who loves the arts. Meg is probably more like her father who is a college professor but he's busy writing a book and doesn't have time for her. The adjustment is not an easy one for Meg.

When Meg meets Will Banks there is an immediate bonding between them. The fact that he lived in the house she and her family are living in when he was a child, gives them a huge commonality. Will senses that Meg is shy and perhaps lonely. He tells her that she is beautiful which she doesn't hear often living in the shadow of her beautiful older sister. Although she wants to concentrate on the cerebral and artistic things in life, she is thrilled and flattered that Will told her that she was a pretty girl. It demonstrates that part of Meg wants to be like her sister and other girls and like her mother used to be. Will is Meg's new friend but what kind of relationship can a thirteen-year-old girl have with a seventy-year-old man? There is nothing predatory about him but Meg needs to have friends her own age.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Meg finds February to be the worst month in New England. Her mother thinks April is when everything thaws out and becomes sloppy and muddy. But to Meg and her father February is worse. The snow is old news and boring and the temperature is bitter cold. Meg hasn't been able to walk over to Will's house because it has been so frigid. Her father is experiencing a terrible writer's block and often just sits at the window looking out over the snowy fields.

Charles tells her that Will is a master cabinetmaker and could have earned a great income had he gone off to a big city but instead has chosen to stay on the family farm. Some people believe that Will is crazy and his is known as Loony Willie. Meg defends Will and assures her father that Will is not crazy. He tells Meg that Will's nephew who lives in Boston apparently is trying to have Will declared incompetent so he can take control of the land which is quite valuable. He wants to break up the land and sell it in small plats. Meg finds the news disturbing. The nephew recently called her father to check up on his uncle.

Meg tells her father that she has taken pictures of Will but has not been able to develop them yet. Her father becomes inspired and suggests the two of them build a darkroom. They sit down and figure out everything they will need for the room. They decide to build the room in a small storage room that is located between the house and the barn. He asks her what equipment she will need to develop her photos. She gives him a full list but doubts they can afford everything. When Charles realizes it would be quite costly, he tells her they won't agonize over it and somehow they'll get what they need. Solutions tend to emerge from the subconscious mind, he tells her.

Molly is sick with the flu practically all of February and suffers from recurring nosebleeds which the doctor says are caused by the impact of the winter dryness on the membranes of her nose. Not that Meg is glad Molly is sick, but it's fun because they play marathon Monopoly like they used to. When Molly fools around with different hairstyles, Meg sometimes wishes that Molly would style her hair—but she doesn't dare ask her. Lydia says she'll be glad when it is summer so the girls can go to camp. Meg doesn't want to spend the money on camp. She wants to use the money for the darkroom. Her father tells Lydia and Molly that he and Meg are building a darkroom and that he plans to buy some of the equipment they need when he is in Boston to see his publisher.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The family is suffering from cabin fever. Molly is sick and the others are tired of being stuck inside. Molly's sickness allows the opportunity for her and Meg to re-bond and



relive their younger years when they played board games together. Meg enjoys the attention from her sister and playing with her sister is a nice distraction for the ailing Molly. Meg is disturbed to think that Lydia wants them to go to camp in the summer. She is maturing and wants to spend the money on the darkroom. It's more important to her and will enable her to pursue her passion for photography. Lydia treats both of her daughters like they're still little girls. Perhaps she doesn't want them to grow up.

Meg is upset to hear that Will's nephew is basically trying to get him committed so he can take over the family farm which is a large and valuable piece of property. It is a foreshadowing of a real problem for Meg's old friend and that perhaps Meg will somehow help and defend him.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

After the darkroom is completed, Meg realizes what having success feels like. She understands how her father feels when he finishes a chapter; how her mother feels when she finishes a square on the quilt she is sewing; and, how Molly felt when she became a cheerleader and when Tierney asked her to go steady. The first photos she develops are those of Will Banks and the old abandoned house. She is proud of their quality and feels like an artist. From her photography class, Meg knows how to develop the negatives. Her mother is surprised to see all the pictures of Will Banks.

Meg recalls that day and how Will had told her about being an Army officer in Germany during World War II. He had talked about how happy he was when he returned home to Margaret and her blueberry pies which he ate for three days straight until he was sick. Meg makes two sets of the prints - one for her and one for Will. She hopes he'll like them.

Meg is surprised and pleased when Molly compliments her on how good the photos are. Meg tells Molly that the ones in which Will is smiling had been taken when he was talking about his wife, Margaret. Molly said she hopes she'll have a husband someday who will smile like that every time he thinks about her. Meg tells Molly that Tierney looks at her that same way. Molly likes hearing that. Meg helps Molly with the sketches she is making of brides—a favorite subject of hers since she was five years old.

Molly says she is thinking about getting married, but it wouldn't be for a long time. Meg tells her that she doesn't think about marriage. She thinks about becoming an artist or writer. Meg complains that she isn't pretty like Molly but Molly says she will be when she matures. Besides, she is so smart and talented that it doesn't matter any way. Meg gets her feelings hurt when Molly tells her that long eyelashes and curly hair aren't everything. The girls don't speak to each other the rest of the night.

Something wakes Meg up that night. Molly is awake and tells Meg to go get their parents. When Meg comes back with their parents and turns the light on, they are shocked to see blood all over Meg's face and her pillow. Blood is still pouring from her nose. Lydia runs and brings in a stack of towels. While Charles tries to comfort Molly, Lydia makes a call and then goes downstairs and starts up the car. Meg decides to stay home while her parents take Molly to the hospital.

Waiting for them to return, Meg wraps herself in a blanket and sits in the big chair in her father's office. She cries, feeling guilty for fighting with her sister. She looks out the window at the sky beginning to turn pink over the white snowy fields. She eventually falls asleep.



## Chapter 4 Analysis

The family has quite a scare when Molly's nosebleeds continue and worsen. When Meg gets angry with her parents for talking about Molly's hospital stay and all the testing that she's undergoing, it demonstrates the worry and fear she feels inside about her sister. It is obvious that something is seriously wrong with Molly and Meg is bright enough to understand that. Unfortunately, Meg had had a silly argument with Molly right before her condition worsened and she had had to go to the hospital. Meg feels guilty and blames herself for Molly's condition. It isn't rational but is understandable. Even though Meg is very bright, she is still only thirteen years old.

Meg is also frustrated with her sister. In many ways she would like to be just like her. For her part, Molly admires her sister's intelligence and talent but Meg isn't mature enough to realize that as perfect as Molly looks, she has her own issues with self-esteem and fears about the future. Molly's illness is symbolic of the reality that she is not perfect.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Meg decorates two special Easter eggs—one for Molly and one for Will. She carefully blows out the insides and carefully paints the fragile shells. Molly is doing better. They keep her in the hospital to run some tests to find out why she is bleeding. They experiment with various medicines after taking a series of x-rays and inject a medicine into her spine. There is a problem with her blood not clotting. To Meg, it seems her parents are behaving strangely. They act like Molly isn't a person any longer. They just talk about the oddly named drugs she is being given.

Meg stays quiet as long as she can but finally becomes frustrated. Her parents only talk about Molly's medicine, complications and reactions. She becomes angry and tells her parents to talk about Molly, not her medicine. They haven't even sent in Molly's application for camp yet. Her outburst works. Her parents stop obsessing about Molly's medication but do say that Molly will have to be on medicine when she returns home.

During the time Molly is in the hospital, there is a lot of confusion. It is hard for their father to concentrate on his book and Meg to concentrate on her schoolwork. Meg has been so busy and distracted that she hasn't seen Will. The weather is nicer so she decides to visit him and bring him his Easter egg and show him the photos. He is working on his truck again but is glad to see her and invites her in for tea. He laughs and tells her he lives in fear that the eighty-year-old town librarian, Clarice Callaway, will be showing up with a handful of overdue library slips. Clarice is not only the librarian, but she is also the president of the Historical Society. She also has a crush on Will.

Once inside, Meg takes the photos out of a large envelope. Will is impressed with the composition of the photos and thinks it is obvious that she knows about shutter speed and camera settings. Meg is so flattered by Will's praise that she almost cries. Will tells her about a camera he got in Germany during the war. He has never used it much. There are a lot of things he hasn't done because he had lost his enthusiasm for many things after Margaret died. Will says he wants Meg to use his camera. Meg is excited. Her camera has only one lens. Will says his camera has four lenses. She can't wait to see it. In return, Will asks that Meg teach him how to use the darkroom. Before she leaves, she hands Will the Easter egg she had decorated for him. He takes a whiff of it and recognizes that the scent is nutmeg. Will tells her that he rents one of the houses on his property to a young couple named Ben and Maria and that they are expecting a baby soon.

That night on the phone, Meg tells Molly about the German camera that Will is going to let her use. Molly will be coming home soon and asks Meg if she will take a glamor shot of her to give to her boyfriend. Meg tells her she'll make her look like a movie star.



## Chapter 5 Analysis

There are enough hints that Molly's condition is serious. Her parents are tense and depressed. Molly's hair is falling out, she has a prolonged stay in the hospital and has to have a shot in her spine—none of which would be necessary to treat a minor problem like a nosebleed. Meg is frustrated because she feels her parents are keeping something from her. Undoubtedly, the parents know much more about the condition than Meg does and perhaps more than even Molly knows. The change in her parents' demeanor is not lost on Meg. It is disturbing to her that they seem to be talking around Molly rather than about her.

Meg is worried although she doesn't know exactly what to be worried about. She sees that her father is unable to concentrate on his book and that her mother is uncharacteristically quiet. Meg feels the stress and finds it almost impossible to concentrate on her schoolwork. Meg is an artistic and sensitive person and is picking up signals from her parents that all is not well. Meg is able to distract herself from her sister's illness by concentrating on her photography and her friendship with Will.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Molly comes home and is almost unbearable. Lydia is catering to her every beck and call. If her mother asks her how she is feeling too often, Molly becomes angry and storms off to her room. Their parents never comment on Molly's grouchy personality which is unusual for them. They usually don't put up with bad behavior. Meg notices that her mother is talking less and that her father seems tense and unusually silent. Meg figures that part of Molly's grouchiness is that she doesn't look as pretty as she usually had. She has lost weight and is pale. And, worst of all, her beautiful curly blond hair is falling out due to the medication she has to take. Meg finally realizes that her parents are depressed.

Will begins coming to the house three days a week for his darkroom class. He is very kind to Molly always bringing her something—a book or a candy bar. One night he brings a little bouquet of pussy willows which thrills Molly. Meg gets a vase with water but Will tells her that putting pussy willows in water makes them blossom and die. Meg arranges them in a dry vase.

Meg is impressed with how quickly Will learns how to develop film. He even has some suggestions to improve the process. Meg and Will experiment with different ways to develop film, depending on whether the film is over or under exposed. Lydia is enjoying Will's visits and listening to him and Meg talks about their photography work. She serves them tea and works on her quilt, using material from a sun suit Meg wore when she was three.

Will takes Meg and Molly over to meet Ben and Maria shortly after they move in. Meg is surprised that Molly wants to go because she has always been so self-conscious about her looks and hair. As it turns out, it is good for her to get out. She enjoys the walk and being out in the sun and finds Will totally charming. Both girls giggle when they realize that Will is just making up Latin-sounding names for the wild flowers he points out to them along the way.

Ben and Maria are working in the garden when Will and the girls arrive. Maria looks like she is ready to have her baby any minute. The couple has different last names so they probably aren't married yet. Maria takes Molly, who is crazy about babies, inside to look at the nursery. Maria serves tea for everyone. Their furniture is sparse and Maria is in the midst of refinishing most of it including a cradle and spinning wheel. Meg is glad to see that Molly is relaxed and having an enjoyable afternoon. It has been good for her to get out.

On the way home, Molly lags behind and picks wild flowers. Meg confides in Will that she wishes she could be more like Molly who finds it easy to talk to people. Meg never knows what to say. Will seems to ignore her complaint and tells her to promise to come



back in the fall—after she moves back to town—to see the fringed gentian in bloom. Meg promises she will but is disappointed that he has ignored her comment about wishing to be more like her sister.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

When Will tells Meg not to put the pussy willows in water because they'll die, it may be a metaphor for an impending tragedy. Will understands the pain of loss since the passing of his wife, Margaret. Meg feels support from her strengthening friendship with Will who is a kind and wise man who may sense that Molly's health is in jeopardy.

After Will and the girls visit Ben and Maria, the old inferiority that Meg feels around Molly returns. Even though Molly is still sick, she is able to be charming and at ease with new neighbors Ben and Maria. Meg is envious at Molly's ability to relax and her ease with conversation. She feels shy and uncomfortable. She is upset that Will ignores her complaint that she's not more like her sister. But Will is thinking in the future. He tells her he wants her to come back in the fall—after the family moves back to town. There is a certain flower that will be blooming in the fall after they've left his property. There is a sense that there is more on Will's mind than the blooming of a flower, something that has to do with the cycle of life.





# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Molly is no longer grouchy but has grown quiet and withdrawn. Only a few things seem to interest her one of which is flowers. With Will's help, she is learning a lot about them. Molly is also interested in Maria's baby. She is helping Maria make baby clothes. Molly takes great care with every piece of clothing she makes. Ben tells her to take a break because the baby already has more clothes than it will be able to wear. Molly also displays childlike behavior. One night, she puts her pajamas on and climbs on to Charles' lap. He immediately puts his book down and holds her.

Meg is confused about Molly's behavior because she isn't sick any longer. She still takes the pills which are making her continue to lose her hair. But once she is able to stop taking the medicine her hair will come back. She still has to go to the hospital for tests every few weeks. Charles tells Meg one morning that Clarice called him. The townspeople are upset that Will rented one of his houses to "hippies." It is probably because Ben and Maria aren't married and Ben has a beard.

There is also incorrect speculation that they are growing marijuana and that they walk around in the nude. Meg tells Charles that neither rumor is true. It is true that they are planning on having the baby at home. They both have been studying about childbirth but also have a doctor on stand-by to help them. Having the baby at home as opposed to a cold hospital is important to them. Meg has to admit to her dad that Ben and Maria are not married. Clarice had already called Will's nephew in Boston about it.

Meg figures she'd better go warn Ben and Maria. She has some photos she wants to show them so she walks over to their house. After looking at the photos, Maria asks about Molly. She wants to know what is wrong with her. Meg assures Maria that Molly is fine. She is recovering from a mysterious condition that involves nosebleeds. Since her return from the hospital, she has gained ten pounds and is getting better.

Meg doesn't know how to broach the subject of their lack of marital status so she tells them about a wedding that took place in the little chapel in town the week before. They both turn their noses up at the thought of weddings. And, as it turned out, it isn't because they are against them. They actually are married but had hated the big wedding their family talked them into. They had wanted to get married in a field of daises by a stream. Maria had decided to use her maiden name which is why people think they aren't married.

Ben and Maria reiterate that the baby will be born in the house. He then takes Meg outside behind the garden and shows Meg where the baby will be buried if it doesn't live. Meg is shocked and tells Ben that it is absurd that he would talk about the baby dying. He tells her that bad things in life are a lot easier to accept when you know that they happen. Meg is upset and storms off.



## Chapter 7 Analysis

Meg thinks Molly is getting better but she seems to be deluding herself. The signs all point to the fact that Molly is quite ill. She is on medication, goes to the hospital for tests, her hair is still falling out and she's become quiet and withdrawn which is not her usual demeanor. Lydia continues to sew her quilt and uses pieces of her daughters' clothing to make it. She wants to hold on to the time when her daughters were young. It is a poignant moment when Molly climbs in Charles' lap. Meg, in her immaturity, thinks Molly is acting childish when she is really seeking comfort from her father. She does not realize the tragedy that is taking place in the family.

When Ben talks about the possibility that his baby could die, Meg is angered. Ben is trying to prepare Meg for the possibility that Molly may be dying. He tells her that death is part of life. And that the bad things in life are easier to bear if you live with the realization that they happen. Meg is in denial. She insists that Molly is getting better but it seems she is the only one who believes that.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Molly returns to the hospital and Meg blames herself. She had blown up at Molly because she'd gotten so lazy. She had still been wearing her nightgown at eleven in the morning. She'd been grouchy lately probably because Tierney had stopped calling her. Meg knows that he is dating another girl at school but she doesn't tell Molly. Meg gets angry when Molly tells her to get her sneakers off her side of the room. They start arguing and when Molly starts to get out of her bed, Meg sees that her one leg is covered in dark red spots. Molly gets back in bed and tells Meg not to tell anyone. But Meg doesn't listen to her and runs down and tells Lydia.

Meg stays downstairs but she can hear Molly arguing with her mother and father. Then she hears Molly crying. They all come down and Charles tells Meg that they have to take Molly back to the hospital. Before she leaves, Molly tells Meg to tell Maria not to have the baby until she gets back home. Meg gathers up some photos of Maria that she had taken and heads over to Ben and Maria's. Will is there having lunch. She tells them that Molly is back in the hospital. Her voice cracks when she asks Maria not to have her baby until Molly gets home. She can't hold back the tears. She blames herself for arguing with Molly. Will, Ben and Maria all comfort her and assure her that it isn't her fault.

Maria asks Meg if she'd like to photograph the birth of their baby. She can talk it over with her parents. Meg is both stunned and flattered. She'd like to do it but she feels intimidated by the prospect. She promises to talk it over with her parents. Ben addresses Maria's stomach and orders his child to not be born until Molly comes home from the hospital. Three weeks later Molly still isn't home and the baby isn't born yet. Meg's parents give her permission to photograph the birth of Maria's baby.

One evening, Meg is in a silly mood and asks her father to dance with her. He has always been a terrible dancer and hasn't improved with age. While they are dancing, Meg says she wishes Molly were there. She hears a small sound coming from her mother across the room. She is crying. She looks at Charles. Tears are streaming down his face, too. Meg holds out her arms to her mother and the three of them dance together. Meg knows right then what her parents can't tell her. Molly would never be home. Molly is dying.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Meg's guilt about her sister's illness returns when Molly's condition grows worse. Despite all the signs and hints from others, Meg holds onto the belief that her sister will be fine and come back home. She thinks that the argument she had with Molly was partially responsible for Molly's relapse. In order to distract Meg from Molly's sickness,



her friends, Ben and Maria, ask Meg to photograph the birth of their baby. In a way they are trying to turn her focus from death and dying to new life.

Meg's parents are not able to express themselves in words that Molly is dying in the hospital. But their tears and their faces twisted in pain say it all. Meg had probably known for a while that Molly was worse than she was willing to admit. But letting go of her sister is something she can not do alone. As she dances with her parents and they hold each other, Meg finds the strength to face the truth and only then do her parents have the courage to confirm the horrible reality.



## Chapter 9

### Chapter 9 Summary

Meg dreams of Molly repeatedly. In her happy dreams, Molly is always her old self. The happy, beautiful girl with long curly blond hair. It makes waking up to see her empty bed all the more difficult. There are also darker dreams, nightmarish ones in which Molly is stumbling in a field of dried up flowers trying to reach Meg. She even has dreams of Maria's baby being born. But the baby is old and looks near death. In the dream, Molly is there and has all the answers to the mysteries of life but won't share them. Meg tells her father about her dreams and he says they are based in reality. She knows that she and Molly will be separated and she is resisting that reality.

Meg is upset that her parents haven't told her how bad Molly really is. Charles had told her that the doctors had first said there was a chance that she'd pull through. But after she hadn't responded to the medication, the doctors had given her no chance for survival. Charles assures Meg that he and her mother have not given up the hope that the doctors are wrong.

Meg is angry. Why does it have to be Molly? She never did anything wrong. Meg is the difficult child—the one who argues and is disobedient. It should be her instead of Molly. Charles tells her that it is a disease that is taking Molly—it is something that happens to people. The disease has a name. Molly is suffering from acute myelogenous leukemia.

Lydia and Charles continue to visit Molly in the hospital in Portland. They tell Meg she is too young but she figures that her parents don't want her to see Molly dying. Lydia continues to work on the quilt and talk about the past. With every stitch she makes, she recalls something about when Molly was little. She, of course, also remembers Meg's childhood. Meg had always been more solemn than Molly even as a small child. She had never cried much. She is like her father and Molly is more like Lydia. Meg realizes how difficult it is for her mother to go through the ordeal of losing a child. Meg tells her that she and her father are there for her.

### Chapter 9 Analysis

In her dreams, Meg is reaching out to Molly. She is not ready to let go of her—yet in her dreams she is never able to reach her. Something is always keeping them apart. That something finally has a name which is a form of deadly leukemia. Her father can barely say the word. Meg has some anger at her parents for not telling her the truth. But she is also angry at herself because she had sensed the truth long before but had refused to face it. Putting off facing the prospect of losing her sister doesn't make it any easier in the end. She is just putting off the inevitable. She had always felt that Molly was better than she was. She feels guilty that a disease is taking the perfect daughter away. She

should be the one to go. But grief makes Meg stronger. She realizes that her mother is fragile and needs her support.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

On August 3rd, Ben calls at five in the morning to tell Charles and Meg that the baby is on the way. Lydia is staying in Portland to be near Molly. Meg and Charles immediately walk across the field to Ben and Maria's house. When they arrive, Ben is near panic. He's forgotten everything he'd read about childbirth. And things are progressing a lot faster than he had ever thought they would. Meg is nervous herself. She can't remember how to operate the camera.

Maria calls Meg into the bedroom. She takes pictures of the smiling mother-to-be who doesn't seem a bit nervous. Ben and Meg listen to the baby's heart beat with a stethoscope. Maria's face contorts in pain in reaction to the pain of intense contractions. Meg goes to the end of the bed. She sees the baby's head but it quickly recedes when the contraction subsides. Soon Maria is experiencing another contraction and the baby begins to emerge from Maria's body into Ben's hands. Meg catches everything on film. She takes pictures of the baby's tiny face as the little eyes blink and squint. The forehead is wrinkled and red. It is a boy just as Ben had thought.

After the baby lays on Maria's stomach for a few minutes, Ben picks him up and lets Meg hold him. He asks her to watch over the baby while he finishes up with Maria. Meg takes the baby into the other room and holds him while she sits in the rocking chair. They name him Happy William—something like the flower, Sweet William, that grows wild in the area. It suddenly strikes Meg that she has to be the one to tell Molly about the baby. She had been afraid to see her but that fear is gone.

Charles drives Meg to Portland. He warns her to think of Molly the way she used to be. He tells her to be prepared for all the machinery that she is hooked up to and the medication she is under that puts her in a semi-conscious state. He tells her that Molly can't talk because of the tube in her throat but she can hear whatever Meg says to her. With a catch in his throat, Charles tells Meg that Molly is handling everything very well. Dying is a solitary thing. The only thing her family can do for her is to be there for her and love her.

Lydia meets Charles and Meg. Molly knows Meg is coming and is looking forward to seeing her. Meg brings the vase with the pussy willows with her. Molly's hair is completely gone. Her skin is translucent. Tubes lead from a myriad of bags above her head to the veins in her left arm. Meg whispers her name and Molly opens her eyes and smiles. Meg tells Molly that Maria had a baby boy and describes how she got to hold him. Will had brought them a big bouquet. They all send their love to Molly. Molly squeezes Meg's hand but the effort tires her out. She closes her eyes and is back in her drug-induced sleep. Two weeks later Molly is gone. Her parents bring the pussy willows back for Meg to keep.



## Chapter 10 Analysis

Meg experiences the wonders of birth and the agony of death. She is part of a new life when Maria has her baby. The cycle of life continues despite the horrible fact that her sister lies dying in the hospital. Meg's life is a roller coast as she participates in the first moments of a new life and spends a brief time in the last chapter of her sister's life. Ben and Maria sense that Meg needs to be a special part of the new life of their son. Not only do they have her take photos of him as he's being born, but Ben puts him in Meg's arms and she is allowed to be the first one to hold him. It strikes her then, that she must bring the spirit of that new life to her dying sister. She tells Molly that the baby was born and that she held it in her place. The new life had given Meg the strength to see her sister. Before that, she had been afraid to see her because she knew she was on her deathbed. But Meg has to deliver the message of life to her sister. It can't be through a message or through her parents, it has to be Meg herself to tell Molly that life is continuing on.





# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

As time passes, happy times return to Meg's life but nothing would ever be the same without Molly. It is September and time for the family to leave the farm and return to town. One day Clarice Callaway comes by to see Charles. She comes with an impatient man who is carrying a briefcase. Meg leaves them to pack up the rest of her darkroom equipment. She and Charles are going to build a darkroom at their house in town. Will has really gotten into photography and is building his own darkroom. It is going to be hard to leave Will behind. Lydia's quilt is packed in a box, too. She had just recently finished it.

Meg hears her parents and the visitors raising their voices in the living room. She hears her father tell the man, Mr. Huntington, that they need to go down the road and see Will. As it turns out, Mr. Huntington is Will's nephew. Charles calls ahead to let Will know they are coming. Will doesn't take it too well. Charles tells Meg to run over and watch the baby and tell Ben and Maria to meet them at Will's house.

When Ben and Maria come back from Will's house, Ben is smiling from ear to ear. As it turned out Ben knows Martin Huntington. He is a junior partner at Ben's father's law firm. Ben had planned to call his father and borrow money for a down payment and buy the house from Will, if he would sell it to them. Now, Meg hates to leave the house she originally hated moving into. Charles suggests that they rent the house again next summer. Lydia fears there are too many memories but Meg points out that some memories are very good. Charles announces that another milestone has been attained. His book is finished. All he has to do is rearrange it a bit. But the writing is completed.

On moving day, Will, Ben, Maria and Happy are all there to wave goodbye. One day after they have returned to their town home, Charles tells Meg he wants to take her some place. They arrive at the University Museum where he takes her to a photography exhibition entitled, "Faces of New England." She wanders through the exhibition and sees some familiar faces and others of strangers. She notices the names of some famous photographers as well. And then, she sees a photograph of herself. She remembers that Will had taken her picture the day of Molly's funeral. There among the photographs of world-famous photographers is Will's photo of her. Looking at the image of herself, for the first time in her life she sees a resemblance to Molly. The picture is entitled, "Fringed Gentian," by William Banks. She tells her father she has to go see Will.

Meg finds him under the hood of his truck working on his engine again. She asks him to take her to see the fringed gentian. Ben and Maria's house is closed up so he can finish at Harvard but they'll be back. They own the house now. They find a clump of fringed gentians standing alone in the forest. It is his favorite flower because it is the last to bloom and doesn't care if anyone sees it or not. On their way back, she can envision



Molly standing in the tall grass with her arms full of wild flowers. She thanks Will for the photo he entered into the exhibition. He had made her look beautiful. Will tells her she has been beautiful all along.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Meg has learned that life does go on after someone you love dies. But she also learns that you never forget that person and that your life is never the same again. The cycle of life continues whether it's a new born baby or a flower that blooms only once a year. It goes on when a seventy-year-old man finds a new and exciting artistic pursuit. Watching Will walk with his cane, Meg knows that she will have to give him up someday, too. But because of her sister, she will be able to withstand anything. Although she's sadder and more mature than her years, she's also stronger and wiser. The biggest lesson Meg has learned is that despite whatever else happens, life continues on in its own mysterious ways.

Meg can see her sister in herself now. She couldn't see it before because she had seen Molly through a distorted filter. To Meg, Molly had been perfect and ideal. Meg could never live up to the image that she had of Molly. But Molly couldn't live up to the image that Meg had of her either. Molly was a vulnerable young girl—uncertain and unsure—just as Meg is. Molly's death symbolizes just how human she was.

Meg is hurt when she wants some sympathy from Will when she confides in him that she wishes she were more like Molly. Instead of comforting her, he seems distracted and tells her she has to promise to come back in October to see the fringed gentian bloom in October. It is the last flower to bloom in the season. It is a flower that is beautiful and secluded in the woods and doesn't care if anyone sees it or not. The flower is a late bloomer just like Meg. Will is telling her that she is beautiful in a unique way and an independent person who doesn't need to impress anyone.



# Characters

## Meg Chalmers

Meg Chalmers is thirteen-years-old when she is told by her parents that the family would be closing up their house in a small town in New England and moving to a farmhouse. Meg is stunned. She had lived in the same house all her life. Although the move would be a long one—about a year—it is a temporary change and they will return to their own house. Meg's father is a university professor who is on leave from the school for a year to allow him to finish writing his book. Meg does not look forward to leaving the few friends she has and her school behind. But she has no choice.

There is a big problem as soon as the family moves into the old house. Meg will have to share a bedroom with her fifteen-year-old sister, Molly. Her sister takes a piece of white chalk and draws a line of demarcation down the middle of their room. Molly is neat and Meg is a slob. Molly cautions Meg not to dare cross the line.

But the sisters really have a close relationship and love each other. Molly is the beauty and Meg is the brains. Meg envies her sister's popularity and social ease while Molly admires Meg's intelligence and talent. The best friend that Meg makes in her new home is the seventy-year-old Will Banks who is the owner of the farm and the houses that are located on it. Molly is a lover of the arts. She wants to be a writer or an artist or photographer. She helps Will learn how to take photos and develop film.

Meg also makes friends with Ben and Maria who live in one of the other houses on the farm. Maria is expecting and when she has her baby, she has Maria take pictures of him while he is being born. She is the first to hold the baby boy.

Tragedy strikes the Chalmers family when Molly falls ill with a terminal disease. Meg doesn't realize how sick her sister is until her parents break down one evening. Meg realizes that she is stronger than her fragile mother and has to help her get her through the tragedy. She loves and misses her sister and she knows her life will never be the same. But she realizes that life has its ups and downs and that neither lasts forever.

## Will Banks

Will Banks is the seventy-year-old owner of the farm where Meg Chalmers and her family move. The farm has several residences including the small house that Will lives in. He rents out the other houses but only to people whom he thinks are right for the houses. One day Meg takes a walk on the snowy property. She is into photography and brings her camera. She meets Will who is outside working on his truck. He invites her in for tea and Meg is struck by how perfect and neat Will's small house is. Meg takes a whole roll of film of Will and his house.



Will is a widower who mourns the loss of his wife, Margaret. He comments that his wife and Meg have the same name. Will has no children and mentions that the only heir to the farm is a nephew with whom he apparently has a few problems. Will had purchased a very expensive camera when he was in Germany during World War II. He lets Meg use the camera in exchange for some photography lessons.

Will sees something special in Meg and realizes that she's not aware of just how special she is. When Meg wishes she was more like her sister, Will thinks of his favorite flower in the forest—the fringed gentian. Just like Meg, it's a late bloomer since it is the last flower to bloom during the season. And like Meg, the flower is unique and beautiful.

Will takes a photo of Meg on the day of her sister's funeral and displays it in an exhibition at the university museum. Meg tells him that he made her look beautiful. He replies that she was beautiful all along.

## **Molly**

Molly is Meg Chalmers fifteen-year-old sister. Molly is the beautiful and popular sister but falls ill with a terminal disease.

## **Charles**

Dr. Charles Chalmers is Meg's father. He is a university professor and is writing a book. He moves the family to a farm so that he is not disturbed by university affairs while he is writing.

## **Lydia**

Lydia Chalmers is Meg's mother. Molly is very much like Lydia. Lydia is a fragile person who tries to put a happy face on everything. She makes a quilt using pieces from clothing that her daughters wore when they were little. The quilt is a tribute to Molly and a way to always have part of her.

## **Maria**

Maria is a new neighbor who moves into one of the farmhouses on the farm property where Meg and her family are living. Maria is expecting her first child.

## **Ben**

Ben is Maria's husband. He and Maria studied childbirth and plan to have their baby at home. Ben tries to cushion Meg for the tragedy of losing her sister by telling her that



one can only deal with the bad things in life if there is a recognition that they will happen.

## **Happy William**

Maria and Ben name their new baby boy, Happy William. Meg takes picture of him at his birth and she is allowed to be the first one to hold him.

## **Tierney**

Tierney becomes Molly's new boyfriend at the country school the girls must attend while they're at the farm. After Molly falls ill, he stops calling her.

## **Mr. Huntington**

Mr. Huntington is Will Banks' nephew and only heir. He wants to have Will committed so he can take over the farm and build more houses on it. But he is thwarted when Ben and Maria buy the big farmhouse on the property.



# Objects/Places

## New England

Meg Chalmers has only lived in one house her entire life. But she must move with her family from their family home in a small New England town to the country.

## The Farm

Charles Chalmers must complete the book he is writing. He decides that he needs the solitude of a farm to finish it where he won't be disturbed by distractions from the university where he is a professor.

## Macwahoc Valley Consolidated School

Meg and Molly Chalmers have to leave their school in the small New England town where live when they move to the country. Their parents tell them that Macwahoc Valley Consolidated School is the name of the new school they will attend.

## The Farmhouse

The farmhouse that the Chalmers family rents for the year that Charles needs to finish his book was originally built in 1840. The family has to make some adjustments to the house which is much older than their family home in town.

## Meg and Molly's Room

Meg and Molly had their own rooms in their house in town. But when they move to the farm, they are forced to share a room. Molly draws a chalk line down the middle of the room and tells Meg to keep her messy self on her side of the room.

## Will's House

Meg visits Will Banks one day. He is the owner of the farm and all the houses that are located on it. Meg is impressed with Will's own small house which she describes as neat and perfect.



## **The Darkroom**

To encourage Meg's interest in photography, Charles suggests that they build a darkroom where she can develop her own film. They build a small darkroom that Meg uses herself and where she teaches Will how to develop film.

## **Will's Camera**

When Will served in the military during World War II, he bought an expensive, high-end camera in Germany. He agrees to let Meg use it in exchange for some lessons in developing film.

## **Portland, Maine**

When Molly falls ill, she is taken to a hospital in Portland, Maine. When her condition worsens, she returns to the hospital where she spends her last days.

## **The Museum Exhibition**

Will has become so proficient at taking photographs, that his photograph of Meg is included in an exhibition at the university museum that includes the works of some of the most famous photographers in the world.



# Themes

## The Cycle of Life

The main underlying theme that emerges in *A Summer to Die* by Lois Lowry is the unending cycle of life. No matter what the losses that are experienced, life continues in its own mysterious and varied ways. The thirteen-year-old Meg Chalmers must deal with the sickness of her fifteen-year-old sister, Molly, and ultimately her untimely passing. In the scheme of things, no one could argue that it's fair for a young person just beginning her life to die. But Charles Chalmers, Meg's father, tells Meg that disease is something that happens and that man has no control over who is struck with it. Disease is part of life.

Just when Molly takes ill, a new family moves into one of the houses on the farmland property. Ben and Maria are expecting their first child. They become close to Meg and Molly and they sense that Molly's condition is a serious one. In an effort to take young Meg's focus away from her sister's condition, they reach out to her and ask her to take photos of their baby when it is being born. They turn her attention away from a death to a new life. When she takes the pictures of the newborn she feels part of that new life. And the couple allows her to be the first person to hold the baby. The baby is born at the same time that Molly is in the hospital in the last throes of her disease.

Will focuses Meg on the fringed gentian which is a beautiful late-blooming flower just like Meg is. He takes her into the forest to show her his favorite flower after her sister's passing. The flower blooms, fades and dies out but will return to life in the very next season.

Lydia, Meg's mother, makes a quilt from scraps of the clothing that her two daughters wore when they were little. Each patch that Lydia adds to the quilt recalls memories of her daughters' first years. She cherishes the quilt and the memories it engenders and completes it around the same time of Molly's passing.

There are other ways for new lives to begin. Seventy-year-old Will mourns the loss of his wife. He is not lonely because he has his dogs and his books. But new life is infused into the kindly old gentlemen when Meg comes into his life. She teaches him about photography and developing film in her darkroom. It becomes a passion for him and he eventually is so proficient at his new hobby that his photo of Meg is included in a museum exhibit with the works of some of the most famous photographers in the world.

## Grief

*A Summer to Die*, which is the story about a young girl and her family losing a loved one, quite appropriately and expectantly has a theme of grief that is initially subtle and eventually, as the story progresses, quiet apparent. The thirteen-year-old protagonist, Meg Chalmers, is introduced as a shy, studious young girl who loves her older sister,





fifteen-year-old Molly, but is also a bit envious of and intimidated by her for her beauty and popularity. Meg likes being herself and having her own dreams but part of her fantasizes about being a perfect creature like Molly.

Molly falls ill and at first the condition is assumed to be a virus or flu. However, the symptoms remain way past a normal recovery time. She is taken to the hospital where a battery of tests is run to see what is ailing her. Although Molly's disease is life-threatening and eventually takes her life. Meg's parents, Charles and Lydia, spare their younger daughter from the brutal reality of the true nature of Molly's illness. They are shielding her from a hurt that they determine will be too overwhelming.

Grief can be experienced in cases other than death. Charles and Lydia know that their elder daughter is dying; however, they can cling to her life and fantasy by not telling Meg. By saying the words out loud, by telling their other child that Molly is dying makes the impending loss of their child eerily official.

Meg holds onto her belief that Molly will be just fine. After all she is the perfect one. Molly's life has been like a storybook and Molly is the storybook princess. Meg is the smart one and at thirteen, she is bright and sophisticated enough to know that her sister has more than a temporary nosebleed when she sees Molly's pillow literally covered in blood. But one way to hold onto her sister, to deny that her sister could leave her, is to deny that she's as ill as all the signs indicate.

Other friends, like Will, Ben and Maria, see what's coming and try to prepare Meg for the tragedy that is unfolding. Ben tells Meg that life has its ups and downs and that in order to be prepared for the bad times you have to be aware that they will happen. To illustrate his point, he shows Meg the place they will bury their unborn child in case he is born dead. Meg is appalled that Ben would even think of his baby's death and leaves him in a huff. But for Meg to think of the possibility that a baby could die, she would also have to acknowledge that a fifteen-year-old could die.

Without understanding what she is going through, Meg is in the first stages of grief even before her sister dies. Deep down inside, Meg senses that Molly's condition is worse than her parents or she is willing to admit. The denial stage of grief is nature's way of softening the blow. It allows the mind to hear the words that someone has passed but it permits the person to hold on to a hope that it's not true until it's impossible to do so.

## Self-Esteem

Meg Chalmers is having a struggle with self-esteem. At the tender age of thirteen, many youngsters experience similar experiences—trying to build confidence and self-worth and figuring out where they belong in their family and in society at large. Meg has an added obstacle in that her sister, Molly, who is two years her senior, has it all—or at least Meg thinks she does. Molly is blond and beautiful. She is never without boyfriends. She is at ease socially and is poised and confident. She is a cheerleader at school and the cutest boy in school is her boyfriend.



Of course, from Molly's viewpoint, she doesn't have it all. No one does. She doesn't consider herself as intelligent or as talented as her younger sister which probably gives her more than a few moments of uncertainty and self-doubt. But Molly is more laid back and accepts life as it happened. Meg is the debater and the rebel, stubborn and argumentative with her parents. Molly is more accepting of her lot in life while Meg rages at the machine.

It is often said that one learns more from problems and bad times than from the good times. It is true in the story of Meg who learns through tragedy that she is a strong and valued person. She has a strength that she hadn't known she had. She realizes that her mother is fragile and passive like Molly. When Molly feels sick and it eventually becomes obvious that she will not pull through, Meg realizes it is up to her to help her mother and even her father survive the loss of their child. Meg hurts too but she is stronger than her mother. Molly is a lot like her mother. After Molly's illness and death, Meg looks back and sees that Molly was a soft and gentle person who relied on other people to lift her up.

Will Banks realizes Meg's real value all along. He compares her to the fringed gentian, a forest flower that is the last to bloom each season. It is a strong beautiful late bloomer—just like Meg—and grows in a spot that is isolated from other flowers. Just like Meg, the fringed gentian doesn't need others to validate who she is.



# Style

## Point of View

A Summer to Die by Lois Lowry is written in the first person narrative and told by the story's thirteen-year-old protagonist, Meg Chalmers. The story is about the loss of Meg's fifteen-year-old sister, Molly, to a terminal disease. Meg tells the story of having to move from her family home in a small New England town to a new life on a farm. The move was necessitated by Meg's father need for privacy and solitude in order to finish the book he's writing. The move is just temporary, but it is still traumatic for young teens to have to give up their school and friends.

When Molly becomes ill, the story of her illness is told from the thirteen-year-old's perspective, who doesn't understand how serious her sister's condition is. It is obvious that her parents are keeping the truth from her and Meg deals with the warning signs as best she can. The reader also is privy to the hopes and dreams of a thirteen-year-old who is not, in her opinion, very pretty and painfully shy. Her struggles with having a pretty and popular sister will strike a familiar note to most readers.

There is some focus on photography, one of Meg's pursuits, and the story contains some technical terms about photography and film development. One of Meg's dreams is to become a writer. Author Lowry is a writer and photographer which lends credibility to the aspirations that Meg has. The book is not autobiographical but was inspired by the death of Lowry's own sister when she was young.

## Setting

A Summer to Die by Lois Lowry is set in an unnamed region of New England. The only city that is specifically named is Portland which is in Maine. The story begins with the protagonist Meg Chalmers and her family moving temporarily from their family home in what is described as a small town in New England to a farmhouse some distance away. The family rents the farmhouse so that Meg's father can have some solitude to finish the book he is writing.

The farmhouse was built in 1840 and is quite an adjustment for the family from the more modern house they have in town. There are three bedrooms and Meg hopes to get the small bedroom that overlooks the fields beyond the farm. However, her father takes that room for his office and Meg and her older sister must share a bedroom. Since Meg is messy and Molly is neat, Molly takes a piece of chalk and draws a line down the middle of the room and tells her younger sister to keep her mess on her side of the room.

Meg enjoys taking walks in the woods and the snowy fields. Will Banks takes her deep in the woods to show her a beautiful late-blooming flower that is his favorite. Molly loves to wander around in the woods and pick bunches of wild flowers. Meg is a photography



buff and she and her father build a small darkroom in the farmhouse so she can develop her film.

The farm itself has several residences. There is an abandoned house and a small house where Will Banks, the owner of the farm and the houses, lives. Meg befriends Will and enjoys his small but perfect house. A young couple who is expecting their first child, rent another one of Will's houses. Meg becomes friendly with the couple, Ben and Maria, who ask Meg to take photographs of their baby when it's born. They decided to have the baby there in the house.

Molly becomes very ill and is taken several times to the hospital. Her condition worsens and she spends her last days in a hospital in Portland.

## Language and Meaning

Since *A Summer to Die* is told from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old girl, the language and tone is appropriate for a youngster of that age. The reader is privy to her thought process and some of the naïve and immature reactions she has and conclusions that she draws. Although Meg is an accomplished young girl and an outstanding student, she is shy and unsure of herself. We learn that she is at once envious and adoring of her sister. While Meg is the bright one, Molly is beautiful and socially at ease. All the familiar feelings that a younger sister has for an older sister who seems perfect are showcased in the story.

Despite Meg's intelligence, the reader is privy to her feelings and opinions about her sister's illness. Meg rationalizes that Molly's beautiful blond hair will return despite the fact that it continues to fall out. Even though Molly wakes up with blood drenching her pillow, Meg reasons that it's just a normal nosebleed that will go away when the weather clears up and after she is given the appropriate medicine.

But Meg senses that more is wrong. When friends try to bring up the subject of Molly's condition, Meg doesn't want to talk about it and changes the subject. She wants to cling to her hope that her sister, her very perfect sister, will be fine. One of the most poignant scenes in the story is completely without words. Meg is dancing with her father and notices that her mother is crying. She looks at her father whose eyes are brimming with tears. It is at that moment that she knows the truth. When her parents finally break down and acknowledge what Meg has really known all along, Meg is surprised that she is stronger than she would have ever imagined. She knows that her mother is fragile and the loss of Molly will be hardest on her. She tells her mother that she will be there for her.

## Structure

*A Summer to Die* by Lois Lowry is separated into eleven medium-sized chapters. The first chapter tells the reader of a big change in the life of the thirteen-year-old protagonist, Meg Chalmers. Meg and her family have to leave their home in the small



New England town they live in and move to a farm house. It's just a temporary move while her father, a university professor, completes the writing of his book. But it's a big upheaval for the family, especially for Meg and her fifteen-year-old sister, Molly, who must both leave their friends and school behind. The first several chapters describe the somewhat complicated relationship between the sisters, which plays a big part in the story.

The middle chapters address the, at times, difficult adjustment that Meg has especially in comparison to her sister who is beautiful and at ease socially. An important friendship is established in the mid-section of the book between Meg and, of all people, the 70-year-old landowner, Will, from whom her parents are renting the country house.

The final chapters of the book deal directly with the cycle of life which is an underlying theme throughout the story. There is a birth and a death. There are flowers that die and return every year. And there is an old man who is young again when he finds a passion for art. In this last section, Meg finds resolution for her relationship with her sister. The tragedy that Meg has to endure makes her stronger and helps her to realize her own values. She learns at a young age that life has its high and low points and that they both must be met with the knowledge that neither will last forever.



## Quotes

"Now be as much of a slob as you want, only keep your mess on your side. This side is mine." (Chapter 1, page 2)

"Mom looked after him with that special fond look she gives to things that are slightly foolish and very lovable. She smiles, and her eyes look as if they can see back into her memory, into all the things that have gone into making a person what they are."  
(Chapter 2, page 18)

"And deep, way deep inside me somewhere was something else that kept me warm on the walk home, even though the sun was going down and the wind was coming over the piles of snow on either side of the road, blowing stinging powder into my eyes. It was the fact that Will Banks had called me beautiful." (Chapter 2, page 29)

"Some memories are better off forgotten, especially when you haven't lived far enough beyond them yet." (Chapter 3, page 38)

"Molly was covered with blood. Her pillow, her hair, her face were all wet with it. Her eyes were open, frightened, and her hands were at her face, trying to stop it. . . but it was still coming, pouring from her nose onto the sheet and blanket in moving streams."  
(Chapter 4, page 55)

"Why did I want to cry when he finished talking? I don't even know what ephemeral means. But something inside me welled up like hot fudge sauce - sweet, and warm, and so rich that you can't bear to have very much." (Chapter 4, page 67)

"Age is a meaningless commodity in most instances. Don't underrate yourself." (Chapter 4, page 68)

"Genius disregards the boundaries of propriety. Genius is permitted to shout if shouting is productive." (Chapter 6, page 81)

"You can pretend that bad things will never happen. But life's a lot easier if you realize and admit that sometimes they do." (Chapter 7, page 105)

"I knew then what they hadn't wanted to tell me, and they knew that I knew, that Molly wouldn't be coming home again, that Molly was going to die." (Chapter 8, page 118)

"Dying is a very solitary thing. The only thing we can do is be there when she wants us there." (Chapter 10, page 135)

"I guess it was just that we wouldn't be doing it together anymore, Will and I. It is hard to give up the being together with someone." (Chapter 11, page 142)



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the relationship between Meg and Molly? How are they different? How are they alike?

What are signs that Molly's condition is worse than Meg thinks? Why does Meg continue to think that Molly will recover?

Why do Meg's parents keep Molly's real condition from her? Would it have been better if Meg's parents had told her the truth about Molly's condition all along? Why or why not?

Why is Meg's relationship with Will important? Why does he want her to come back in October to see the fringed gentian in bloom? What symbolism is attached to that event?

Why do Ben and Maria ask Meg to take pictures of their baby being born? Why does Ben show Meg where they will bury the baby if it doesn't live?

There are many emotional passages in the book. One of the most poignant is when Meg realizes that Molly would never come home. Describe that scene. How are her parents able to convey to her that Molly is terminally ill without saying a word?

Why could Meg take pride in Will's success in photography? What deeper meaning is there when Meg sees Molly in the photo of herself.?