

The Summer I Learned About Life Short Guide

The Summer I Learned About Life by Carolyn Meyer

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Contents

The Summer I Learned About Life Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Overview

The Summer I Learned About Life deals with the common adolescent turmoil of relationships with parents, siblings, and friends, as well as worries about the future. Meyer sets this story in a small Pennsylvania town in 1928 and tells about these subjects through the eyes of fifteen-year-old Eleanor (Teddie) and her interaction with her family and friends over the course of one summer. What makes this book particularly interesting is that although it takes place in the 1920s the issues are timeless. Teddie and her friends could easily be living in the 1990s and facing the same dilemmas. There are humorous ideas that can be pulled from the story and compared to the present.

Doing so suggests that being a teenager is always difficult, and that generations have faced decisions on how to establish their own identities amid the pressures of teen pregnancy, prejudice, narrow-mindedness, loyalty, and belonging. Teddie, Rob, Grace, Julia, Hannah, Will, Poppa, and Momma introduce readers to a humorous series of events that help them all learn more about life.

About the Author

Carolyn Meyer is a native of Pennsylvania, where she spent her childhood and went to college. She began writing in high school, and at Bucknell University she majored in English. She graduated cum laude and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa honorary society. Before she became successful as a writer, she worked as a secretary.

Meyer has lived in Connecticut, a second time in Pennsylvania, New York City, New Mexico, and Texas. She has traveled to many parts of the world and has written both nonfiction and fiction about her travels. She has contributed to a number of popular magazines for adults such as Redbook and Town and Country.

Meyer's first book for young people, entitled *Miss Patch's Learn to Sew*, was published in 1969. For years she concentrated on nonfiction in which she wrote about stitchery, breadmaking, crafts, and rock tumbling, before she moved on to studies of people, such as the Eskimos, the Mayas, South Africans, the Northern Irish, and the Japanese. Most of the latter books have been based on firsthand experiences from her travels, having talked to many different people in their homelands.

In 1979, ten years after publishing her first nonfiction book, Meyer wrote *C. C. Poindexter*, her first book of fiction that she describes as semi-autobiographical. She continues to base her works on parts of her life. *Eulalia's Island* (1982) depicts one of her son's summer experiences on the Caribbean Island of St. Lucia, while New Mexico is the setting and source of characters for *The Luck of Texas McCoy*, (1984) Elliott & Win (1986) and *Wild Rover* (1989). Her 1993 book *Rio Grande Stories* draws from her newest home in Texas.

She has also written on topics such as adolescent suicide and substance abuse in the Bantam "Hotline" series.

Carolyn Meyer has shown great versatility throughout her career. Both her fiction and nonfiction have received citations as Notable Books and Best Books by the American Library Association. She is a prolific writer who engages her readers with expository and narrative texts.

Setting

This book begins at Teddie's fifteenth birthday celebration, a family supper, during the summer of 1928.

Her family has decided that she must begin learning to be a lady that summer, so they try to set the mood with a cake decorated in rosebuds served with strawberry ice cream. Teddie, however, feels no inclination to be a lady. She would much rather learn about life, a subject she defines as "the things that happen to you whether you want them to or not, plus all the things that you wish would happen, plus the things you're afraid are going to happen, and why they happen that way, and how to get the good things and not the bad ones". She is certain that it is not even remotely related to baking, sewing, ironing, and other "womanly" tasks.

Her family prevails, and she receives for her birthday gifts a cookbook, an apron, white gloves, an Emily Post book of Etiquette, an account book, a copy of Gulliver's Travels and a book of devotions. Only her best friend, Grace, and her brother, Rob give "life related" presents—a family picture of Charles Lindberg and a balsa model of The Spirit of St. Louis. Since Teddie intends to become an aviatrix like Amelia Earhart, these gifts relate to the life she wants.

In contrast, her mother and older sister do not even know why Earhart is important and consider her to be an old maid. Their aim is for Teddie to correctly make beds, cook, darn socks, and embroider pillow cases. The book recounts this 1920s summer when these conflicting goals are resolved.



Social Sensitivity

There are three areas of social sensitivity in this book that may concern parents, teachers, young adult readers, and others. Probably the most controversial are the feminist attitudes held by Babe and Teddie. Babe, a flapper who briefly dated Rob, smokes, desires a career as a journalist, and believes God is a woman. Teddie dreams of being an aviatrix, does not plan to marry or have children, and has no desire to learn domestic skills.

The Schneider family is quite pious in their spiritual beliefs. They strongly follow their religion, but they have little tolerance for different faiths. For example, Babe is an Episcopalian, and that is not acceptable. Similarly Republicans are the only acceptable political party, and Babe's support of Alfred E. Smith further isolates her. When Teddie's girlfriend, Grace, becomes pregnant, she is quickly whisked out of town with little attention to anything but her banishment. Teddie and Grace also discuss sexual roles in marriage that might be controversial today. All of these incidents should be good tools for discussing these contemporary social issues.

Literary Qualities

While Meyer tells an interesting story in a clearly presented setting, her attention to characterizations and theme seem to be the strongest traits of this novel. This often humorous story contains many problems that wind through several situations on their way to resolutions, and these problems transcend the setting. The setting never takes away from the timelessness of many of the incidents that are presented—conflicts with parents, siblings, and peers; assertion of independence; prejudice; the results of irresponsible sex.

Perhaps the ideas of conflict with siblings and asserting independence can be summarized in Teddie's description of her sister, Hannah, early on in the book: "My sister strongly disapproved of my plans to be an aviatrix. If for some reason a woman could not find a husband or was widowed or struck by some other disaster, then she should be a nurse or teach young children. Anything else was unnatural."

Grace seems to reinforce the traditional point of view. She tells Teddie that it is a "privilege, not a duty" to understand how to iron a man's shirts or which parts of a chicken to serve him.

Probably the weakest feature of the book is Meyer's choice of overused comparisons. Rob races upstairs with a letter from his girlfriend, "as though it were a winning sweepstakes ticket."

Julia is so pretty that "Boys swarmed to her like bees to honey," and Warren looks at Teddie like she is "a visitor from a distant planet." Julia come to visit one summer afternoon "looking cool as a cucumber." Such expressions are used throughout the story. Even though they may have been fresh in the year 1928, they weaken the appeal of the story and the clarity of the writing for today's reader.

In summary, then, Meyer is skillful in depicting her characters and telling a simple but timeless and sometimes funny story. The setting is clear and believable, and Teddie's point of view is a good vehicle for relaying the theme of growing up in adolescent life.



Themes and Characters

The reader gets to know a variety of characters through this story, although the plot revolves around Teddie, Grace, Rob, and Julia. Momma and Poppa and Hannah play major supporting roles, and everyone from Tinnie, the dog, to Billy, the baby, to Babe, the vamp, enhance the plot.

Meyer skillfully portrays the major characters. Teddie is reflective, clever, caring, independent and determined.

She suffers through the summer as she tries to learn her womanly duties. At the same time, she never loses her drive to be a flyer, her ability to dream up novel solutions to problems, and her dream of a different life. Grace, who is obsessed with reading and writing poetry, secretly loves Rob (Teddie's brother), and she talks about how to please a man. She is dominated by her gossiping, controlling mother, while her father adds prejudice and opportunism to the family's "virtues."

Generally, Grace is a loyal friend to Teddie. She serves as a foil to Teddie, with her lack of independence contrasting with Teddie's attitudes. Rob, Teddie's older brother, is a college student who is in love with a Pittsburgh girl from a well-to-do family. He is working during the summer as a city laborer and comes home filthy everyday. However, when he has free time, he likes music and acting and seems to be the most playful family member. He keeps a diary in which he is often overdramatic, and Teddie's reading of his private journal leads to several major problems within the plot. Julia is a school friend of Teddie and Grace. She lives alone with her mother in a wealthier section of town. During this summer, she learns many hard lessons about life that result in a lost love, an unwanted sexual advance from an older man, pregnancy, and banishment to an out-of-state school. Grace and Teddie help her through some of these situations and learn vicariously from their friend's experiences.

The supporting cast of the book— Momma, Poppa, Hannah, and Will— fall into the category of being very opinionated, conservative, well-meaning traditionalists. They expect women to do their work (including waiting on their men), men to make major decisions, and everyone to follow traditional moral beliefs. They all live in an extended family household and seldom question the absoluteness of their values and ideas. Hannah and Will are particularly pious, but a pregnant Hannah eventually shows she has a little of Teddie's spirit when she refuses to make a replacement meal for Will the one night that liver is served for supper.

All of these characters interact to develop the theme of the universalities of the difficulty of growing up, no matter when adolescents mature into adults. While Meyer's story is set over sixty-five years ago, the same conflicts that face today's teen-agers also confront Teddie. There is conflict between her plans for her life and her family's plans, as well as problems with siblings, friends, and society's expectations. Political and religious beliefs—and prejudices—are intertwined with conflicts in male/female relationships, changing times, teen pregnancy, and socioeconomic class expectations.



About the only current turmoil that is not part of the story are differences in ethnic cultures. There are also brief allusions to man's inhumanity to man: Grace's father tries to have Poppa removed as Sunday School superintendent because Rob, Teddie, and Grace were caught dancing. The same theme is touched on when Tommy writes that he cannot help the pregnant Julia.



Topics for Discussion

1. Teddie states early in the book that she does not intend to marry, but she does plan to "make daring flights across the Atlantic" as an aviatrix.

How do these goals compare to your expectations for fifteen-year-old women of the 1920s?

2. Teddie finds herself caught between a little girl playing with dolls and a "gorgeous dame out flying my airplane." Do today's teen-agers face similar circumstances? What are they?

How are they handled?

3. Hannah believes that young women have only three roles as adults—they can become wives and mothers, nurses, or teachers of young children.

"Anything else was un-natural . . ."

How have these options changed for today's young women? How has this affected our society?

4. Julia's mother is preparing her "for a good marriage, which meant a husband with money and prestige—foreign royalty, maybe." How does Julia foil this plan? Do today's parents still have the same goals for their children, especially their daughters? Why or why not? Is a good marriage defined the same way?

5. The evening meal at Teddie's home is started when her mother rings the silver bell. They have iced water from a pitcher; cloth napkins; meat, potatoes, and vegetables; and a nightly dessert! Contrast that to most family's eating habits today.

6. When the family goes for a Sunday afternoon drive, Poppa constantly tells Rob to slow down, watch other drivers, make turns signals, and so on.

How does this compare to driving with parents today?

7. Teddie notes that in the summer of 1928, Prohibition was in effect and bathtub gin existed. What does this mean? How are regulations different today?

8. Julia gives several descriptive phrases about flappers. What did she say? How would you define a flapper?

9. When Rob teaches Teddie and Grace to dance, Mr. Bisnell, Grace's father, tries to have Poppa dismissed as superintendent of the Sunday School and bars Grace from Teddie's home.

How would this incident be treated today? Does it illustrate a Christian point of view?



10. When Teddie finally gets to take her first flight, she feels free, exhilarated and independent, as though she is a part of the airplane. She decides "This is it. This is what I want to do, and I'm going to do it." Would you predict that she will achieve her goal?

Why or why not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Summer I Learned About Life is set in 1928. Find at least ten examples from the book that typify the 1920s.

2. Teddie desires to be an aviatrix like Amelia Earhart. Research Amelia Earhart's life and accomplishments.

Compare Teddie's characteristics to her heroine's.

3. Another of Teddie's interests is Charles Lindberg, who flew The Spirit of St. Louis. Find out about Lindberg's life and accomplishments as well as the tragedy that struck his family.

4. Babe and Poppa debate the presidential election of 1928. Find out who the candidates were, the issues of the election, and the outcome. What prejudices did Poppa seem to have?

5. Babe is quite a feminist for 1928.

At one point, she says, in reference to God, ". . . she created us to be human beings." Find other examples of her feminism, and compare them to women's beliefs today.

6. Julia gets pregnant without being married. Discuss how this situation is treated by Teddie, Grace, Tommy, and Grace's mother. How would the same situation be handled today?

7. How many fifteen-year-olds of today—female and male—would be expected to learn the domestic skills that Teddie studied the summer of 1928? Do you think they should be?

Why or why not?

8. Carolyn Meyer has written several nonfiction books about subjects like stitchery, cooking, and crafts. Find some examples of these and similar topics in the book.

For Further Reference

Flowers, A. A. "Late Winter Booklist."

Horn Book, 60,1 (February 1984): 63.

This is a positive review of Meyer's novel that summarizes the plot, characters, theme, and humor in her work.

"Meyer, Carolyn." In Contemporary Authors. New Revision Series, Vol. 2.

Edited by Ann Evory. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981: 471-472. This source includes basic biographical information, including personal and career highlights.

"Meyer, Carolyn." In Something About the Author. Vol. 70. Edited by Donna . Detroit: Gale Research, 1990: 360-363. This material summarizes extensive personal and professional data about Carolyn Meyer that is enhanced by her own personal comments. Several sources of further information are cited.

Review. Bulletin of the Center for Children Books, 37,2 (October 1983): 34.

This article gives a synopsis of the book and an unfavorable literary analysis based on its apathetic story.

Related Titles

While Meyer has not written a series of books about the same characters, the theme of young teen-age women who strive to find themselves and their roles in life can be found in some of her other works. In *The Luck of Texas McCoy*, Texas is a sixteen-year-old who tries to keep running her inherited New Mexican ranch. Likewise, C. C. Poindexter is fifteen and very tall for her age. She already feels that she does not belong, and when her parents divorce, she must find her way through that emotional trial and adolescence, feeling as if she is a misfit.

There are other adolescent novels, perhaps more powerful ones, that contain similar themes. Cynthia Voigt's *Izzy* in *Izzy*, Willy-Nilly loses her leg after her drunken date wrecks his car.

In a few months, she must adjust to her disability and lack of loyalty and understanding from her friends. Several of Voigt's titles about Dicey Tillerman also relate to this theme.

A more historical and serious treatment of a similar theme appears in *Lyddie* by Katherine Paterson. Set in the early 1840s, Lyddie and her younger brother are deserted first by their father, and then by their mother. They try to survive on their farm until their mother hires them out to different employers. Over a few years of time, Lyddie works first in an inn and then becomes a factory worker in Lowell, Massachusetts. She survives adverse conditions, including serious illness and sexual harassment, while she saves her money and eventually decides to attend college. Again, an adolescent female protagonist has found her atypical role in life and moved on to try to accomplish it. This commonality unites all these adolescent novels with Meyer's works.



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