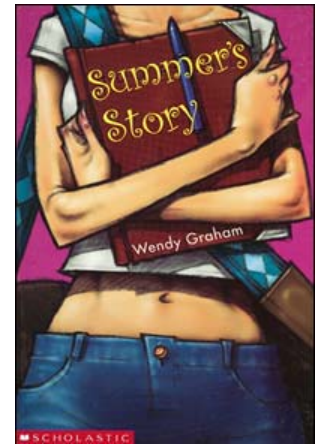


TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

Summer's Story

Written by Wendy Graham



Introduction

I was born in Melbourne and have lived in Sydney, Brisbane and Perth. But Melbourne, where I've lived for the last twenty-five years, is where the heart is - and the family. There's rather a lot of us. As well as my own two adult sons, my mother, two sisters and their husbands and children, there are cousins, nieces, nephews. We are a diverse lot, and we are all slightly mad.

As a child I loved Blinky Bill, and Enid Blyton's *Magic Faraway Tree*, *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven* books. And I still remember blubbering into my pillow as I read *Lassie Come Home* and *Black Beauty* and Oscar Wilde's *Happy Prince*.

In about Grade 3 I wrote a book of short stories and poems. A teacher asked if she could keep it and I said yes and never saw it again.

At the age of about ten I learned I could tame, train and teach birds to talk. To this day birds fascinate me. I've always had pet birds sitting on my shoulder, around the house. It's my dream to get a baby African macaw one day, and hand raise him. He'd have an enormous aviary to fly in, but he'd spent a lot of time in the house with me. These large, colourful, incredible birds cost thousands of dollars so it's a very lofty aspiration.

As well as birds I love dogs. My nine-year-old white English bull terrier (piggy eyes rimmed with red, big roman nose, pink lips) is so ugly and dear to me that I get tears in my eyes looking at her. And I still have dreams about my sweet-natured, blind pug Bonnie who died five years ago aged sixteen.

As a young adult I was a flight attendant for TAA for five fantastic years, living in a flat with other girls and travelling. This led to my first writing successes - an article on air hostess training published in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, followed by travel stories published in the newspaper. I then wrote several romantic short stories, which were published in women's magazines.

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From 1994 to 1997, while working part-time, I attended Box Hill TAFE and completed a Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing & Editing). It was great being a student again as an adult. Part of the course involved Writing for Children - and it was here I found my niche. My publishing credits now include thirty children's educational books and two trade children's picture books. My first junior novel was published in 2004 by UWA.

For four days a week I work at a police complex as administration assistant to the Divisional Police Superintendent. The job is challenging and fascinating, and every day is different. I especially like using my creativity in the documents and presentations I produce.

I escape nearly every weekend to my beach house. There I have created a garden paradise - part bushland with native trees and shrubs, and part cottage garden, with honeysuckle-covered fences, passionfruit and grape vines. You can follow paths that meander among roses and fruit trees, leading to garden seats of stone and wood. I've installed bird houses, bird baths and bird feeders. The garden's wild residents include possums, frogs, and a lazy spackle-backed lizard that eats apricots. An ibis comes to visit - and I've even seen a snake slithering in the iris clumps. Galahs wait in the trees for me to fill the bird feeder, and magpies, braver and less patient, rap with their beaks on the glass door if I'm not quick enough with their treats. The magpies take food from my hand.

I take my laptop there to write - and sometimes I don't. Sometimes friends or family stay too, or I go by myself. I spend time on the beachfront just walking, stop for an al fresco meal or cappuccino, and watch the boats and waterbirds.

About the Book

Summer's Story tells of a year in the life of fifteen-year-old Summer Gibbs, a crucial year in which she falls in love for the first time and experiences the sort of joy and pain and uncertainty that will mould her character for ever.

Summer is intelligent, wilful, stubborn, impetuous, charming and thoroughly infuriating: a typical young teenager who has not quite left childhood behind and not quite reached adulthood. She goads her gentle New Age mother, Marilyn, by doing things she knows Marilyn disapproves of - smoking and drinking, bleaching her hair, defying rules and expectations. Her mother's punishments mean little to her: grounded for rudeness, she still manages to sneak out of the house one night to go to a rock concert. Summer can be depended on not to do what is expected of her.

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Whether she likes it or not, Summer's family is central to her life. Since her much-loved father's death, she and her mother and her elderly, confused grandmother all live together in Gran's old Melbourne home. Gran is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, and her increasing senility both angers and distresses Summer. Her grandmother is becoming erratic and dysfunctional as surely as the old music box Summer treasures is starting to run down - the ballerina now moving jerkily, the music sounding tinny and flat. Summer is torn between deep affection for her grandmother and frustration at the restrictions her presence in the house imposes on both her and her mother. Gran is not 'normal', and her unpredictable behaviour is embarrassing to a teenager for whom looking cool and sophisticated is almost an article of faith. Summer's wish that Gran should be put into 'a home for the bewildered' is finally granted when even Marilyn can no longer cope with her. Paradoxically, Summer feels somehow responsible for this next inevitable step in the progression of Gran's illness, and suffers guilt for having wished it so.

Despite her self-confident image, Summer suffers agonies about her appearance - red frizzy hair, enormous melon boobs, white freckly skin. It amazes her that Dylan, the boy she meets on the beach when they are both wagging school, should be interested in her when she sees herself as being physically so far from perfect. But Dylan is attracted to her, and Summer fancies that he loves her just as much as she loves him, although neither is able to put feelings into words. Dylan supports her ambition to start a rock band; he is not fazed by her grandmother's behaviour, and he soon becomes the centre of Summer's life. When he tells her that he is going to live in Queensland with his family, she can only see this as a betrayal, and severs all contact with him - changing her mind at the last minute to rush to his home to say goodbye as he is preparing to leave. This episode reflects her impetuous behaviour later when she decides to take the train to Queensland in order to tell Dylan how much she loves him. She makes the trip, finds that Dylan has left school, and tracks him to the orchard where he is working as a seasonal fruit-picker. Everything she has imagined about their meeting disintegrates as she realises the awful truth: Dylan is not happy to see her. He has moved on. He no longer loves her.

Summer's guilt about her unkindness to Gran, coupled with the painful loss of Dylan's love, leave her in a state of extended misery and apathy. In the end, though, she rallies: the thought of her band's first gig is something to look forward to.

Wendy Graham's notes on writing Summer's Story

It is fairly usual for authors to use snippets of real life, to borrow from their own life experiences and the lives of others around them, so these have formed the basis of the novel.

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During my teen years the group I hung around with was into surfing - and it was in the days of those long, heavy boards. So every weekend was spent travelling to the beaches in big cars with surfboards on the roof - magical years. There's an old movie, *Gidget* (surfie chick movie), and because it's so reminiscent of those angst-ridden and lovelorn teen years, no matter how many times I watch it, my heart sings with remembered daring and joy.

But *Summer's Story* is entirely fiction except for the beginning when Summer wags school and goes to the beach and meets Dylan on the pier. At the age of fourteen I did just that - nicked off from school to the beach where I met my first boyfriend, also fourteen, who later broke my heart.

There are other echoes of my life in the story, mostly in the detail. For example, I have a pet talking cockatiel named Cosmo. And like Summer's mother, Marilyn, I like trying different pursuits. Over many years I have taken courses in French, yoga, pottery, piano, making handmade teddy bears and machine-sewn patchwork quilts. I have also taken up calligraphy, scriptwriting, poetry, adult tap dancing (briefly) and tai chi (for several years). I am proficient at none of these!

Themes and Ideas of Interest to Teachers

Summer's Story explores the life of the main character, Summer, in the context of the lives of other members of her family, and her friends. As a portrait of a young adolescent girl, it works within a series of frameworks to provide the many different 'personalities' that make up the girl who is Summer Gibbs: Summer as wayward daughter, as student rebel, as girlfriend, as granddaughter, as ambitious musician and writer, as best friend. All the different sides of her character blend into the intricate totality of just who Summer is: someone who lives on several different levels and whose character changes, chameleon-like, according to who she is with. Each strand of her story can be separated out from the others and followed to its conclusion; but, woven together, they show the complex and often contradictory characteristics that make her the person she is. Wendy Graham's skill as a writer is to show all the different shades and angles that make up the complete character.

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Story Structure

The story takes place over nearly a full year, and is broken into four sections, each named for the season in which the action takes place: Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. There are echoes here of the pathetic fallacy, in which nature is credited with having human emotions. Thus spring is the time when Summer meets Dylan and falls in love; the heat of summer reflects the intensity of their relationship; autumn indicates how the idyll starts to change and fade, with Dylan leaving Summer both physically and emotionally; and winter is a time for sorrow and reflection, but also allows for the growth of new hope: sunlight breaking through clouds.

The story is also balanced between what Summer sees as her 'real' life, where she can achieve whatever she wants (being a writer and a musician, starting a band, having a relationship with a boy) and the life she leads at home, where predictably she is treated like a child. Only after the huge emotional upheaval of a romantic breakup can Summer come to terms with the need to reconcile both aspects of her life and be who she truly is. We know this acceptance is not going to be easy: it's summed up in the last line of the book: 'It was a long way home.'

Characters

Crucial to the character of Summer is the fact that she lives with her mother and grandmother. A deep love connects all three women, but they often struggle to understand each other. Marilyn, in particular, strains to cope with an elderly mother who now needs to be looked after like a child, and a difficult adolescent daughter who sees herself as too grown up for childish rules (although she still cuddles her old toy wombat in times of stress).

It is very much a world of women, in which men are only visitors: both Gran and Marilyn are widows, and there is no strong adult male presence in Summer's life, only memories of her father, small sunlit snapshots. 'Memories just leaped into her mind: right now she saw herself as a little girl riding on his back as he crawled along on the carpet ... The memory was as clear as today. She even remembered how his whiskers felt, and the smell of his hair when he bent to kiss her goodnight' (p. 29).

Summer's obsession with Dylan (to the initial disgust of her best friend, Amy) makes her entirely self-absorbed, and there is a poignant moment when, going to the dresser in her grandmother's room to get her a handkerchief, she sees Gran's wedding photo: '... a framed photograph caught her eye. It was Gran as a bride with her handsome groom. It gave Summer a jolt to realise that once Gran had been a girl in love with a handsome boy, just the way she herself was in love with Dylan' (pp. 75-76).

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There are other implied connections between Gran and Summer: for instance, both love music. Gran was once an accomplished pianist, and even in her altered self she longs to hear the Salvation Army band - a wish that Summer is later able to fulfil. Gran's gradual, tragic decline as Alzheimer's disease takes hold brings out those parts of her personality that most closely resemble the character of her granddaughter: her tenacity, her stubborn independence, her frustration with what life has dealt her, her self-absorption. In a particularly powerful scene, during which Gran takes offence at her daughters, Gran 'pulled herself up to a standing position and, very deliberately, tipped over her plate. Meat, potatoes, pumpkin and peas spread satisfyingly over the table and gravy dripped down onto the carpet. Gran stared down at the mess, a little surprised at what she'd done. Her hand went to her forehead; she was uncertain what to do next' (p. 74). The link with Summer's own spontaneous, impetuous behaviour is clear.

In a contrasting parallel with Summer, Dylan has no direct female influences in his life: his mother walked out on the family when he was small, and he lives with his father and younger brother. Unlike Summer, Dylan is a confident high achiever (he excels at sports, especially surfing and skateboarding), but his interest in graffiti points to a darker, less confident side that momentarily concerns Summer ('It was a part of his life she'd known nothing about' p. 99). This alerts us to the idea that there may be other things Summer doesn't know about Dylan, in spite of her assumption that they are as close as two people can be.

Predominantly, this is a story about relationships. It compares the euphoria and pain of romantic love with the loving, often fraught, sometimes seemingly impossible relationships that exist between people bound together by blood and history. Unlike romantic love, though, family love is solid and lasting. Crucial to our understanding of Summer is the fact that although she treats both her mother and her grandmother with impatience and sometimes with contempt, she has a deep love for them. It is Wendy Graham's ability to show the strange contradictoriness of family affection (we often treat worst those we love best) that is at the core of the book and gives it its strength and credibility.

Issues and Ideas

Wendy Graham lists her main themes as:

- The importance of striving towards a goal or fulfilling a dream (i.e., the girls' rock band, Dream)
- The hazards of acting on impulse: making choices and having to live with the consequences (i.e., Summer following Dylan to Queensland)

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- The need to 'be careful what you wish for' (i.e., Summer wishing Gran into a home and then being sad about it)
- The futility of negative emotions like anger and jealousy
- The importance of dealing with disappointment and loss, and moving on.

As well as revealing aspects of different kinds of relationships, *Summer's Story* describes a quest to discover personal identity. At the end of her momentous year Summer has discovered many things: understanding of the frailty of others (especially Gran, who, she now knows, will always be someone she treasures in spite of the changes in her); understanding of the power of love, but acceptance that it isn't necessarily for ever; and knowledge of her own resilience. She realises that life goes on, and there are still things to look forward to, like the future of her band Dream.

Many teenagers will find in this novel points of similarity to their own lives, and it provides a good starting place to discuss their own feelings, especially in relation to:

- Parents and parental attitudes
- Relationships
- Physical appearance
- Self-confidence
- Peer pressure
- The elderly
- Underage drinking/smoking
- Socially unacceptable behaviour (e.g. shoplifting, graffiti)
- School

Alzheimer's Disease

Gran's illness and its effect on her family is an important strand of the story. Alzheimer's disease is one of the most prevalent diseases of western society, and as the Australian population ages it will have an increasingly profound effect on many families. *Summer's Story* shows with painful clarity how loss of memory can erode a person's very being, and how mental and physical regression impact on daily life. Once again, the novel provides a good starting point for a discussion on this common problem. Does a person you love cease to be that person when disease has eroded memory and personality?

Summer's Story is largely about identity: who we are, how we are shaped by our relationships and our behaviour; and how others see us. Gran's story subtly highlights the story of her granddaughter: the younger woman going forward into the world and discovering things about herself, the older woman retreating into the shadows of dementia, with only memories of her youth still clear in her mind.

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