

# The Book of Summers

by Emylia Hall

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## About the Book

For nine-year-old Beth Lowe, it should have been a magical summer?sun-kissed days lounging in rickety deck chairs, nights gathered around the fire. But what begins as an innocent vacation to Hungary ends with the devastating separation of her parents. Beth and her father return home alone, leaving her mother, Marika, behind.

Over the next seven summers, Beth walks a tightrope between worlds, fleeing her quiet home and distant father to bask in the intoxicating Hungarian countryside with Marika. It is during these enthralling summers that Beth comes to life and learns to love. But at sixteen, she uncovers a life-shattering secret, bringing her sacred summers with Marika abruptly to an end.

Now, years later, Beth receives a package containing a scrapbook, a haunting record of a time long forgotten. Suddenly she is swept back to the world she left behind, forced to confront the betrayal that destroyed her?and to search her heart for forgiveness.

## Discussion Guide

1. Cultural identity is an important theme in the book. It's a factor in motivating Marika to leave her family, and at one point Erzsi claims she is starting to feel "more Hungarian." To what extent do you think we "feel" our nationalities? And is this sense of belonging something that we are born with, or something that we develop willfully?

2. Memory is depicted in the book as an incredibly powerful force—a source of great pleasure and immense sadness. Discuss the relationship that Marika, David and Erzsi each have with their memories, and how their lives have been affected as a result.
3. Villa Serena is a bohemian idyll—a place where Erzsi can run free and be joyful, but the “real world” does still manage to intrude. Discuss some scenes in the book where Erzsi feels her paradise is threatened. How many of Erzsi’s concerns stem from her own feelings of vulnerability, as she moves between her father and her mother’s homes and becomes a teenager?
4. Marika is a free spirit, who amazes and disappoints Erzsi with equal vigor. Is she a good mother? Is she a bad mother? What characteristics does she have that define her one way or another?
5. Zoltán is a quiet figure in the book, yet a powerful one. Discuss his relationship with Erzsi and his importance to the story.
6. During the last summer in Hungary, Erzsi is looking ahead to shaping a life with Tamás—she is deeply in love with him. How real do you think the love is that we feel at sixteen? Is it too fanciful to imagine that their romance could be rekindled many years later?
7. Marika’s revelation comes as an absolute shock to Erzsi. What do you make of her coping mechanisms in the immediate aftermath and the years that follow? How do you feel about the differing ways that Erzsi treats Marika and her father, from that moment onward?
8. When Erzsi cuts ties with Marika, she also loses Tamás, Zoltán and, to an extent, the whole of Hungary. To what degree are our perceptions of a place shaped by the people who inhabit it? Is it ever possible to separate the two?
9. David Lowe’s path is a difficult one; first as a widower, then a single parent and guardian of a secret he cannot bring himself to share, then finally a father who loses the trust of his only child. How much should he blame himself for the way events unfold? Is he right to allow Erzsi to spend time with Marika every summer? And how honest should we be with our children when they are young?
10. Making peace with the past is a major theme in the book, notably for Erzsi, but also for her father. By the end, how successful do you think they have each been in achieving this?

## **Author Bio**

Emylia Hall's short fiction has appeared in a number of publications and has been broadcast on BBC radio. Her first novel, *THE BOOK OF SUMMERS*, was a Richard and Judy book club pick in 2012, and translated into eight languages. She lives in the U.K. with her husband, who is also an author.

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