

A Teacher's Guide to
The Summer Before Boys
by Nora Raleigh Baskin

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nora Raleigh Baskin was chosen as a *Publishers Weekly* Flying Start for her novel *What Every Girl (Except Me) Knows*. She is the author of novels for middle-graders and teens, including *The Truth About My Bat Mitzvah* and *Anything But Typical*, which won the ALA Schneider Family Book Award. Nora lives in Golden's Bridge, New York.



Other titles by Nora Raleigh Baskin:

Almost Home

Basketball (or something like it)

In the Company of Crazies

All We Know of Love

Websites of Interest

www.norabaskin.com

<http://web.mac.com/norabaskin>

www.homesforthebrave.org

www.woundedwarriorproject.org

www.womensmemorial.org

www.wordle.net

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Summer Before Boys movingly deals with the themes of separation from our loved ones, what makes a family, imagination, friendship, coming of age for girls, passage of time, and play. Perhaps, most importantly, Nora Raleigh Baskin respectfully honors the sacrifices of our youngest heroes—the children of members of the military.

This reading guide presents a wealth of choices—questions, quotes, and words that will promote thinking, discussing, and enjoying. The goal is to help students understand the *how* and *why* of this novel and to come to an appreciation of the writer’s craft. *The Summer Before Boys* will be a pure joy to teach!

Prereading

These questions could be given to students as choices for journal entries or for group discussion before reading.

Based on the title and picture on the front cover, what do you expect *The Summer Before Boys* to be about?

Does the dedication surprise you? When an author dedicates a book to someone or some organization, it is a tribute, an honor. Does the dedication change your expectations for what Nora Baskin cares about most in this novel?

Do you have a family member who is serving or has served in the military? Do any of your friends have family in the military? How do you and/or your friends feel about their service?

List as many wars as you can. Where is the United States involved in war or general armed conflict now?

What do you know about the events that took place in the U.S. on September 11, 2001? Do you hear people talk about 9/11 very often?

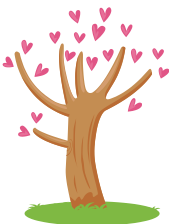
What kinds of things have you done on your most memorable family vacations?

Have you ever spent extended time away from your parents? Did you feel homesick?

Do you have a favorite outdoor place? Describe it. Include details that appeal to all of the senses.

What kinds of games do you like to play on vacation? How have those games changed as you have gotten older? Did you ever pretend to be someone else and make up stories or have imaginary adventures?

A Mini Family Tree



How are these characters related to each other? (Have students do this on their own, but a synopsis is included below.)

Julia Aunt Louisa Uncle Bruce Julia's mom Julia's dad Eliza's grandfather

Aunt Louisa is married to Uncle Bruce. Eliza is their daughter. Julia and Louisa have the same father so they are sisters. That makes Eliza Julia's niece even though they are both twelve years old. Also, they are best friends. Julia's dad is Eliza's grandfather. Julia's mom is Louisa's stepmom. Julia is twenty-two years younger than Louisa. Louisa is thirty-four years old.

What kind of an impact does this blended family dynamic have on the characters in the novel?

While Reading

Notice the strong words that Nora Baskin uses. They say exactly what she wants them to say.

Student Activity: Keep a bookmark-sized piece of paper in your book while you are reading and jot down words that you find interesting or that you want to make sure you own in your vocabulary. Write down the page number where you find the word for future reference.

Pay particular attention to how the author uses nature to reflect a character's feelings and to help the reader have a better sense of time passing. Think about ways that the external world helps us to understand the internal world of the characters.

Watch for shifts in time. Notice how language changes if the author is presenting olden days and how it shifts back. Look for the word "C'mon." How does it help the reader?

Questions to Spark Thoughts and Discussion During and After Reading

Julia is the narrator. Think about how Eliza might tell the story.

Why does the author include a description of Eliza's and Julia's identical nightgowns? *I could barely make out the faded kittens and puppies in the fabric. Little pink kittens and little blue puppies.* (Chapter 1)

Why is time so important in the novel? (Chapter 1 and others)

Imagine in the olden days—Why do you think Eliza and Julia love to play this game so much?

(Chapter 1 and others) Mohawk Mountain Lodge was built in 1862. Why is the setting of this novel so important? (Chapter 2) **Student Activity:** Write an advertisement for the Mohawk Mountain Lodge. Include details of its setting and history.

What do you think Julia means when she thinks, *This is going to be a safe day*? (Chapter 2)

How does Julia's mom have bad timing as described in Chapter 3? What does bad timing mean? What other characters have bad timing in the novel?

What is the National Guard? Why does Julia's mom join the National Guard? When did she join? How old was Julia then? How does Julia react when her mother joins? What is good about the fact that her mom is in the Guard?

When Julia's mom is about to ship out to Iraq, why does Julia fervently hope that she won't put on her hat? (Chapter 2)

What are some of the ways "the olden days" at the hotel were different from what Julia and Eliza experience in the current day? Think specifics—travel? Clothing? Manners? Speech? Food?

Why does Pam say to Julia that she must be so proud of her mother? How does Julia react? How does Eliza comfort her?

What does Eliza mean when she says, "Nothing is different in the world"? (Chapter 5) Why does Julia disagree with her?

Do you think Mrs. Jaffe is helpful as a support system for Julia and Peter at school? Why does she make them uncomfortable?

In the summers before the current one, how does Julia view her physical self?

(Chapter 5) What are some of the things that Julia knows about her mother's life as a nurse in Iraq?

In Chapter 6, Julia describes how her family starts fighting with each other right before her mom leaves for active duty? Why does this happen?

What are some of the ways Julia's imagination helps her cope? Later in the novel, does her mother talk about having a similar experience?

Photographs are important throughout the novel. Think about some of the times Julia looks at and thinks about photographs. Why does she have such an interest in them?

What does "magic" mean to Julia and Eliza? How does the concept of magic change in the novel?

In what ways is the flashback in Chapter 9 important to Julia's awareness of herself? How does the author create suspense in this scene? Why does Julia think, *I didn't feel like myself anymore*?

How does Eliza interact with Michael? Are her feelings and actions different from Julia's?

When Mrs. Jaffe asks Peter and Julia to write about their parents and the war and what it felt like to worry if your mom or dad is going to live or die, how does Julia react? How does Peter interact with Mrs. Jaffe? With Julia?

Why does Julia develop a sudden interest in horses? (Chapter 11)

Why does Eliza keep playing the past game?

In Chapter 12, when Julia sees the men in uniform how does she react? What are some of the ways that the author makes this scene very suspenseful?

Why does Julia recount stories of other women who have been killed in conflicts? (Chapter 14 and others)

Why does Julia say “Shrek” when she knows Eliza is mad at her? Can having long-term connections, knowing the past and what kinds of things have happened to someone, help two people get over disagreements? How?

(Chapter 16) Why does Eliza always get the blame for everything that happens? (Chapter 24)

How does Michael figure out where Eliza might be? Why does Michael want everyone to think he is a hero?

Why does Peter tell Julia that he hates her? (Chapter 37)

What does the “summer before boys” mean? Julia calls it a slow process. What does she mean when she says about D’Ville . . . “I can’t see the details anymore”?

Why is it significant that Julia spelled Michael’s name wrong? Why does Eliza finally tell her about the fact that she spelled his name wrong?

Does Peter like Julia? Student Activity: Write a scene between the two of them including dialogue to extend the novel.

Is Julia “boy crazy”?

How has Julia’s mom changed since she came home from Iraq?

What is the significance of Julia’s mom’s Cabbage Patch Kids dolls? (What is a Cabbage Patch Kids doll?) Student Activity: Google it.

Why don’t we ever learn Julia’s mom’s name?

Important Quotes or Passages to Discuss

Many important themes in the novel are emphasized in these quotes and passages. Students could pick one or more and go back to the text and prepare to discuss or write about the ones they chose. This activity will help students to see the importance of going back to the text.

Chapter 1 I always knew what time it was.

Chapter 5

“She says it’s time for me to become a young lady.”

Chapter 6

“I’m not always going to be here to do it for you.”

Chapter 7

“There’s too much life to be lived to be bored.”

Chapter 8

Because this, apparently, this fluttering-in-the-stomach-I-have-no-idea-why-I-just-said-that kind of thing, is a whole different kind of magic than Doc Miller, pioneers and Indian captives—but it felt like magic all the same.

Chapter 9

When September 11th was just the day after the 10th, a day before the 12th.

Boys were boys because they said so, but really there was no difference.

Chapter 10

Most of my life I feel like I blend in, or maybe I just don’t stick out, which comes in pretty handy at school.

Chapter 12

In the deployment program before Mom left, I heard about a kid who hid under his bed whenever the doorbell rang.

Chapter 17

“Well, sometimes I wish my dad hadn’t come home at all.”

Chapter 24

No brain could hold all that. No one could see all those faces, shoes, dinner plates, bedtime stories, and kisses.

Chapter 29

But the truth was I hadn’t thought about Eliza at all.

Chapter 31

But if you ask me no one cares about any war. If it doesn’t affect them personally, they can act like it isn’t happening.

Chapter 33

But what I will always remember is Lori Ann Piestewa was the first American woman to die in Iraq.

Chapter 36

Besides, my dad told me, when my mom comes home she may not really want to run out and battle the crowds at Wal-Mart.

Chapter 40

Vietnam is called the Unpopular War, which has got to be the strangest expression ever.

“I can tell you one thing . . . There will be plenty of boys, Julia. Plenty of boys.”

Writer’s Craft—The How

Below are some fine examples of the writer’s skill. Analyze specifically what makes this writing so strong. There are many other examples of detailed passages that help the reader make a mental image of the scene. There are suspenseful scenes (young Julia swimming; the men in uniform; the first kiss; searching for Eliza). There are other strong examples of the use of similes, alliteration, consonance, and details. Have students find more examples that they like. Be very explicit about the techniques the author uses to make the writing so powerful.

Chapter 1

growing wings of glistening, glowing gossamer

I saw the sky dotted with sparking stars and a sliver of the moon that looked like someone had tried to erase it but couldn’t get it all.

Chapter 5

We liked to take the tended walking path, the tiny road cut into the woods, scattered carefully with tiny sharp pieces of shale.

Chapter 9

It kind of always smelled wet, like the inside of a tree would smell if I were an elf or a gnome.

Chapter 10

The dock was small, and on the busiest days maybe six or seven girls could lie side by side like crayons melting in the sun.

Chapter 15

Uncle Bruce's voice was so distinct, like the sound of his truck over the gravel driveway, rough and familiar.

Chapter 23

The TV sounds came on, the gray light moved across the ceiling from light to dark and dark to light like a moth was batting against a bare bulb. Chapter 24

Our ice creams seemed to feel the heat first and softened.

Chapter 26

Sunlight rested on the top leaves and filtered down dappling the dirt path.

The trees bent their heat-weary heads like puppy dogs lolling their tongues.

Chapter 27

Her lips pressed together like a plastic mask's. I watched Eliza's body go stiff, like a doll still fastened in her box. Her clothes were fake, no real buttonholes, the material thin and held together with hidden Velcro.

Chapter 28

Tall, fragile grasses stood up right along the edge in clumps like tufts of hair, and hundreds of lily pads floated on the surface of the water. They were all different sizes and shades of green, some with delicate stems rising from their centers. And dotting the mass of green were bursts of colorful pink and white and magenta blossoms just sitting patiently in the still heat of the day.

Chapter 30

Huge halogen lights that were normally used to dry paint on the walls in large rooms were set up on the roof of the hotel and lit up the sky like strange white suns.

Chapter 38

What was real and what was not was slowly starting to separate. Like a cocoon, splitting right down the center and revealing what's inside. Like a whistle piercing the quiet night. Like a parent who leaves one way and comes back another, changed forever.

Wonderful Words

Have students make and print their own Wordle. www.wordle.net

portable technically unwavering linoleum deployed flickering pilled intricate lattice
gnarled thatched quarry hairpin scandalous lurch musty fatigues labyrinth filtering
massive proceeding stumble remnants insignia clogging petticoats gazebo muslin knickers
reprimands eyelet watchtower devote suitors disbelief pact sullen fuming glistened
settlement expedition grippe alas beeline glacier blurted imitation perk reservoir
miniature petrified embarrassed temporary murky waning underfoot mulling settees
flailing hoisted mince convoy improvised explosive device pinafore corset conjure
tethered festivities trellises encounter glisten unbecoming milestone downright
indistinguishable pummel virtual chatterbox potential anticipation noticeably muted
sensation instantaneously secretive nixed copycat scorcher lolling brambles intravenous
fragile tufts gesture stricken approximation lingering procedure crevasses wringing
indemnity visualizing indescribable barrage ravine involuntary privileges aftermath

Follow this link to view this list as a Wordle:

http://www.wordle.net/show/wrdl/3505112/Words_I_Like_from_Nora_Baskin%27s_Newest_Novel

Guide prepared by Robin Millay, M.Ed.

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