

That Summer

Author: Sarah Dessen

Reviewed by: Jena Vallina, 17

Star Teen Book Reviewer of *Be the Star You Are!* Charity

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If you own a television set, chances are you've born witness to the ridiculous, stereotype-driven world of "teenage" television. The sun-kissed teenagers on these shows are usually portrayed by twenty-somethings with supermodel genetics. Their characters breeze through the high school hallways, living a glossy and beautiful lifestyle more suitable to a debutante than a sophomore. Any teenager will attest that their own high school experience was decidedly less glamorous than *Gossip Girl* and *The Vampire Diaries*. Sarah Dessen's *That Summer* thankfully skews the unrealistic teenager tropes common to young adult media. Haven, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, is one of the most awkwardly realistic depictions of youth put to page.

Haven is too tall. At fifteen, she is nearly six feet. Dessen skillfully uses Haven's growing body as a metaphor for the uncomfortable transition from child to adult. As Haven adjusts to her newfound gangly limbs, she must also deal with the fallout from her parents' tumultuous divorce.

Her father has since remarried, leaving her mother despondent. If that wasn't enough drama, Haven must also suffer through her snooty older sister's upcoming wedding. In between trying on bridesmaid dresses and solving her sister Ashley's latest dilemma, Haven encounters a best friend she has less in common with every day, an unbalanced local celebrity, and most excitingly, Ashley's ex-boyfriend Sumner. The arrival of the charismatic Sumner provides

Haven with some of her only glimpses of joy in the novel. Don't be confused: this will not turn into a May-December romance. The far older Sumner is not a love interest, but a representation of Haven's idealistic and cheerful childhood which has now been fractured by time and change. Through her interactions with this array of characters, Haven learns a vital lesson about the perils of growing up and moving on from the past.

Dessen skillfully creates an atmosphere of ennui throughout the novel. Anyone who has been young can remember-and cringe-about those moments of awkwardness and boredom where nothing made much sense. Much of what young people consider adventures occur when trying to fill time with meaning. To Haven, that sense of meaning is difficult to find. She is a wandering soul, desperate for something more than her small-town life but also uncomfortable to the idea of major change. My biggest praise of Dessen is that she never makes Haven seem like a teenager as written from an adult. Haven is young, immature, and frankly quite clueless about the ways of the world. She is never overly precocious or intelligent, spouting philosophical lectures as though she is a student at the Sorbonne instead of a salesgirl at a mall shoe-store. Creating a truly relatable character is no easy feat, and although parts of the story can get jumbled and messy, Haven always remains constant as the beating heart of *That Summer*. Parts towards the end can get confusing, and you should not expect much closure or any dramatic finale. This isn't a traditional coming-of-age tale. There are no big discoveries or insights into the universe. Haven is simply existing and growing, as children tend to do. However, the book still ends positively with the knowledge that wherever she is destined to be, Haven will eventually get there. This is an ideal summer read for girls and boys ages 13 and up looking for a book that will accurately portray the tribulations faced while growing up. As mentioned in the beginning,

this is not a book where teens go on exciting and glamorous adventures. If you want a book that will transport you, this is not it. It is a raw and even uneventful novel, but it speaks truthfully to the highs and lows of life. There is some mild language and a few sexual references, but nothing graphic or detailed.

Book Recommendations

Before I Fall by Lauren Olivier

Since You've Been Gone by Morgan Matson

The Sky Is Everywhere by Jandy Nelson

Eleanor and Park by Rainbow Rowell

Lola and the Boy Next Door by Stephanie Perkins