

The Summer I Turned Pretty

Author: Jenny Han

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For many, summer is the time for self-reinvention. The hot and humid air is ripe with the promise of changing one's identity for the cooler and more interesting. During those warm, wind-swept hours on the beach, a young girl can feel a metamorphosis occurring within her. Between the months of June and August, new worlds can open and swallow you whole. But come autumn, the rose-colored glasses fly off and reality settles in at last. It is the brutal awakening of a woozy summer dream. For Isabel "Belly" Conklin, the protagonist of Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, those summer fantasies are all she lives for. Her life, as she narrates in the beginning of the novel, is composed of summers. The brief and dreamy months spent at the beach house are a respite, a chance for Belly to overcome the awkwardness plaguing her humdrum life throughout the previous seasons. The source of wonder is not just the sand and sea breeze; naturally, it is also found in two other vacationers, handsome brothers Jeremiah and Conrad Fisher. As the months trickle by, hearts break and secrets are revealed in a book as hazy and carefree as a summer morning.

Upon arriving at the vacation home ran by her mother's best friend Susanna Fisher, Belly makes a valuable insight about herself. Suddenly, she is no longer the frumpy little sister pouting in the corner as her older brother runs around freely with the Fisher boys. In the span of a year, Belly has become, as the title suggests, pretty. More than pretty, it appears, judging by the

startled reactions of Jeremiah and Conrad. While Belly only views Jeremiah as a friend, she is thrilled by Conrad's interest, having nursed a crush on him for ages. Interspersed with Belly's tumultuous saga of romance and newfound beauty are vignettes detailing her prior experiences on the beach at a younger, notably more awkward age. In these chapters, the reader discovers the origins of Belly's feelings for Conrad and the roots of her friendship with not just the boys, but Susanna. Inflicted with breast cancer, Susanna appears to be in remission. Her disease plagues the book, a firm reminder of tragedy prevailing over even the most magical of summers. Belly's story is not entirely idyllic, as one might glean from the title. She may have become beautiful, but she has not become wise. As a protagonist, Belly suffers from insecurities abound as she frequently changes her mind about which boy to embark on a summer romance with. The candidates are the dark and rebellious Conrad, the sweet and seemingly naïve Jeremiah, and the friendly face from the past Cam. Readers expecting a tedious love square might be sourly disappointed, as the biggest dilemmas are usually fought internally. In fact, there isn't that much romance or passion in the book. The drama to be found all occurs not in the actual plotline but within Belly's excitable little head.

Belly's self-preoccupation might just be the bane of *The Summer I Turned Pretty*. Han can nonetheless be praised for her deft and nuanced portrayal of teenage girlhood. Belly's vulnerabilities speak true to the realities of being young and clueless, yet wore on my nerves as I continued reading. She whines constantly, flittering from boy to boy and creating emotionally wrought tension out of the most minor of incidents. While perhaps realistic to the hormone-charged years common to teenagers, it is grating and alienating to the reader who cannot help but hope Belly finally matures. This isn't a traditional love story, where girl meets boy and chaos

ensues. While there are threads of romance weaving throughout the storyline, Han's novel can best be considered as a portrait on the history of a summer love. Han paints a vibrant and often melancholic picture of childhood angst, family dilemmas, and the awkwardness of falling in love-and falling apart- for the first time. It is an overwrought and sometimes unlikable story consumed by Belly's vapid fantasies of love. Yet, there is a kindness in the author's treatment of her protagonist. Han does not view Bell like a child, despite her frivolous and childish antics. Her sudden revelations on romantic feelings for whichever boy is currently wooing her are treated with the kind of reverence usually reserved for groundbreaking spiritual breakthroughs. Yet, although Han may have faith in Belly's romantic saga, the reader might end up feeling underwhelmed by the lack of progress and intrigue. If you are expecting Disneyland, you might want to keep on driving. The only fairytales exist in Belly's mind.

Due to a few mild sexual references, I would recommend *The Summer I Turned Pretty* for

readers 14 and up. Here are some other books to read after you finish:

Anna and the French Kiss by Stephanie Perkins

This Lullaby by Sarah Dessen

The Last Song by Nicholas Sparks

Second Chance Summer by Morgan Matson