

Summer

By Ali Smith

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Summer (2020) is an extraordinary accomplishment by Man Booker Prize Finalist Ali Smith. Alongside *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), and *Spring* (2019), *Summer* is the last novel of her dazzling Seasonal Quartet. It has an oil painting, *Early July Tunnel* (2006), by David Hockney as its cover, and the Italian filmmaker Lorenza Mazzetti's *Self Portrait* (2010) as its inside cover. 'Summer' symbolises the imagined ending that we, as a community, are heading towards together.

Summer narrates the story of Sacha Greenlaw's family. Sacha is a sixteen-year-old girl whose hand is scarred by the broken superglued glass of an egg-timer; the mischief made by her thirteen-year-old brother Robert. Sacha and Robert live with their mother Grace, who brags about playing Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* and her acting past. Their father Jeff faces a financial crisis and lives next door

with his girlfriend, Ashley, a political activist who has recently lost her voice in the process of writing a book about lexicons. Sacha's family is visited by Arthur and his ex-girlfriend Charlotte. They have kindly taken Sacha to A&E for treatment of her injured hand and brought her home. Arthur currently lives with Elizabeth, the one-hundred-and-four-year-old Daniel Gluck's neighbour's daughter, who has looked after Daniel for a long time. In Daniel's reminiscence, he recalls the story of his sister Hannah, whose another name is Adrienne Albert, and her child. It turns out that Arthur is Daniel's biological son, and Sacha and Robert are Hannah's offspring.

Summer narrates the reunion of broken families and the loss of home for immigrants, indicating the boundary within and outside houses. Arthur used to work for SA4A, 'the company that bus whole busloads of homeless

people' from other cities into London, and now runs his website 'Art in Nature' (Smith 2020: 105). Charlotte lives with Arthur's aged aunt Iris at his dead mother's old house in Cornwall. They provide accommodation for many illegal immigrants, who are recently released by the SA4A Immigration Removal Centre, in this huge house during the pandemic. Sacha is empathetic towards homeless people and writes letters to a Vietnamese immigrant and prisoner Hero, who receives help from Charlotte. His identity as an immigrant is compared by Sacha to that of a swift since the arrival and the departure of swifts mark the start and the end of summer (Smith 2020: 119).

The life story of Lorenza Mazzetti is brought into *Summer*. Lorenza lived with her twin sister Paola, their father's sister Nina and her husband Robert Einstein, 'who was a cousin of Albert Einstein and their slightly older cousins, Luce and Anna Maria' in Tuscany (Smith 2020: 256). In 1944, the Nazi officers 'killed all the Einsteins they could find – Nina and her daughters' and kept Lorenza and her sister alive, 'because their surname wasn't Einstein' (Smith 2020: 256). Their uncle Robert Einstein committed suicide not long afterwards. Lorenza moved to London as an immigrant, found a place in the Slade School of Art and later became one of the founders of the Free Cinema movement. *Summer* exists in the first song that the English and Scottish soldiers taught a group of shell-shocked young children, who sat beside the graves of Lorenza's family in Italy, 'You Are My Sunshine' (Smith 2020: 264). Its existence represents that of art, which reminds us of our being and purpose and our memory of past

sorrows in the summer of 1976, 1940, and 1914 (Smith 2020: 286).

Lorenza's films *K* (Metamorphosis) (1954) and *Together* (1956) feature prominently in *Summer*. In the opening scene, the image of a man carrying two suitcases and dancing along a narrow path amid a landscape of ruined houses in *K* (Metamorphosis), transmits a message of hope and resilience (Smith 2020: 6). Likewise, *Together* spreads the idea of summer: 'The English word for summer comes from the Old English *sumor*, from the proto-indo-european root *sam*, meaning both *one* and *together*' (Smith 2020: 263). It narrates the story of two deaf-mutes talking with each other in sign language in the bomb-blasted street of postwar East London, with a group of naughty children who 'march behind the men like a mock parade' (Smith 2020: 126). This film heals the trauma caused by the Holocaust and bomb attacks by highlighting the importance of a community with a shared future for human beings.

Summer is rich in literary allusions. Its epigraphs include quotations from Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), Charles Dickens's *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* (1848), Stanley Kubrick's 1968 interview with *Playboy*, Edwin Morgan's 'One Fine Day', and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1623). Echoing these quotations, *Summer* deals with the themes of time and continuity, past sorrows and forgiveness, and indifference and hope. Smith makes 'a merry tale come out of a sad one', as she engages with resources and texts about internment in the UK during two World Wars and news of everyday life in the UK's Immigration Removal Centres (Smith 2020: 284).

The tension between alienation and reconciliation is central to *Summer*. Smith highlights the boundary between immigrants and the locals, government and the public, and different groups of people classified by ‘religion, ethnicity, sexuality, intellectual or political dissent’ (Smith 2020: 4). She also notes the current crises presented by the borders between countries (Brexit), life and death (Covid-19 and the Holocaust), seasons and global warming (the wildfires in Australia), and private and public comments (online bullying in social media). To present her criticism through her craft, Smith mentions different forms of art and uses different figures of speech. Symbolically, she criticises Boris Johnson’s reference of Muslim women as the Royal Mail letterbox in an article published in the *Evening Standard*. Smith also compares the real mask to the mask of celebrities and politicians on television, and the emission of carbon dioxide to a tea cosy. These metaphors indicate her critique of Islamophobia, the hypocrisy of celebrity culture and the crisis of global warming. Franz Kafka’s metamorphosis is applied by her as ‘a powerful act of accusation against the daily grind that makes us indifferent to past, present and future injustice’ (Smith 2020: 260).

Time is the central concept that motivates Smith to write *Summer*, as she remarks in her 2020 interview with David Robinson: ‘Time passes, and times pass. Nothing’s forever, and a lot is at stake [...] We need to feel the urgency one way or another, and work communally for the better imagined, if we really want the happy ending’ (Robinson 2020). Smith, moreover, breaks out of the constraints of the traditional concept of

time by using non-chronological narration and invoking Einstein’s theory of special relativity. ‘Time is dimensional’, remarks Robert (Smith 2020: 47). He reads and constantly refers to Andrew Robinson’s *Einstein on the Run* (2019), recalling Einstein’s sojourn as a violinist and political refugee in a hut of Roughton Heath in 1933. Smith looks to past sorrows and injustice during WWII and to current issues, such as Brexit, a topic she interrogated in *Autumn*. Her character Sacha ‘mistakenly’ uses her own saying – forgiveness ‘is the only way to reverse the irreversible flow of history’ – as a quotation by Hannah Arendt, author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), in her school essay about forgiveness to ‘mark one week since Brexit’ (Smith 2020: 8). Her quotation reminds us that forgiveness is the inner light that we can supply against the vast darkness.

Although *Summer* inspires the reader to reflect upon history and current events, it is simple but subtle, humorous but sarcastic, rich but easy to follow. Broken families find love between brothers and sisters, and between lovers and friends by supplying help and love to immigrants and strangers. At last, heroism defeats indifference. Love triumphs over hatred and malice. Forgiveness heals trauma. Reconciliation is reached through art across boundaries.

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Bibliography

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