

The Heart of Summer

Harper Perennial

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Introduction

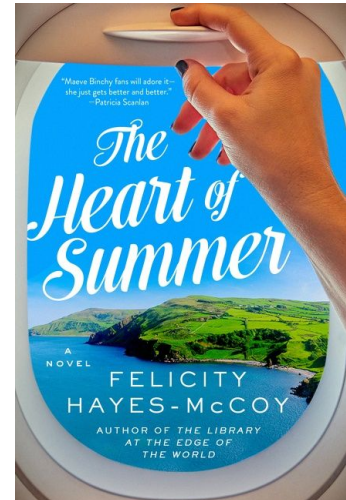
Summer has finally arrived on Ireland's west coast. On the Finfarran Peninsula, Hanna Casey is looking forward to al fresco lunches with friends and balmy evenings with her boyfriend Brian in their stunning new home in beautiful Hag's Glen. With a painful divorce behind her and family drama finally settled, Hanna begins to plan a romantic holiday getaway for the two of them.

But life takes a turn when Brian's adult son suddenly moves in and Hanna unexpectedly runs into Amy, a former flatmate from Hanna's twenties in London. Reminded of her youth—and all the dreams and hopes she once had—Hanna begins to wonder if everything she now has is enough. When Amy suggests a reunion in London with old friends, Hanna accepts.

While it's only short hop to England, Hanna feels like she's leaving Brian far behind. And when she's offered a new opportunity—the chance to be more than a local librarian in the little rural community where she grew up—Hanna is faced with a difficult choice: to decide what her heart truly wants.

Questions for Discussion

1. The central character in *The Heart of Summer* is middle-aged, rural librarian Hanna Casey. Having recovered from a bad divorce, Hanna is living in a new home with her new man, Brian. Though they're totally happy, she's beginning to realize that they've also taken on each other's families. Do you understand her sense of unease?
2. "*Hanna Casey looked up from her computer and was briefly enchanted by dust motes dancing in sunlight.*" What do you think of the book's opening sentence? Have you ever found yourself enchanted by something you notice just by chance?
3. The Carrick Psalter in Lissbeg library is Hanna's pride and joy. What do you think of the author's descriptions of it? Have you ever seen a medieval manuscript, or reproductions of pictures from one?
4. In *The Heart of Summer*, the author describes two houses Hanna loves – the new home built for her by Brian, and the little clifftop house she inherited from her great-aunt Maggie. Which house would you prefer to live in? Have you ever needed to think about passing a home to the next generation? What kind of decisions might that involve?



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5. "...if she hadn't been fool enough to fall in love with Malcolm Turner, she wouldn't have walked away from her dream before it had even begun." The reappearance of Amy, Hanna's former roommate, makes Hanna think about all the plans she'd had that never happened. Do you think this reassessment of the past often happens to divorced people? Do women who marry and have children tend to feel they've given up more of their independent lives than men are required to? Is this changing? If so – or if not – why?
6. Are there contrasts and similarities between Hanna's life and that of newly-weds Aideen and Conor? How does the author show us how Aideen feels about starting married life in Conor's parents' home?
7. What do you think of Aideen's relationship with Conor's parents? If you were born in a town, how do you think you'd feel about moving to live on a working farm?
8. Fans of the Finfarran novels have called Mary Casey "*the mom we love to hate*". Do you think that description fits her? How does the author show Hanna's difficult relationship with Mary? What do you think of Brian's attitude towards Mary? Do you think he deals well or badly with Hanna's complex reactions to her?
9. Can you think of three words to describe Amy? How would you feel if a close friend from your own college or high school days walked back into your life?
10. Is there a public library near you, and do you use it? What do you think of the author's depiction of a librarian's work? Do you think groups like Hanna's Monday Memories Club are useful for seniors? Are there other library-based groups or facilities that can/could help families and communities? Have you ever volunteered to help in one?
11. Get one person in your reading group to write down a single word to describe Jazz's relationship with Mary, fold the paper, so the word can't be seen, and pass it to the person on her/his left. Keep going till each person in the group has added a word, folded the paper and passed it on. When everyone has contributed, open the paper and read out the list. You may find the same word appears frequently, or that each of you has chosen a different one. Discuss!
12. Hanna is beginning to worry that Mary is starting to lose her memory. How does the author introduce, and then build, this part of the plot? When do we know that Mary herself is worried? What do you think of Jazz's response to the problem?
13. Aideen hates "*being cast in the role of go-between*" in her cousin Bríd's relationship with Dan. Do you understand this? Were you ever in that position yourself and, if so, how did it make you feel? How well or badly do you think Aideen deals with the problem?
14. Though Hanna thinks Brian should spend time with the adult son he's hardly known, it takes a conversation with Fury O'Shea to make her recognize her own feelings – "*... it's Brian's son in Brian's house, and you're wondering where you ought to put yourself ...*". What do you think of Fury's intervention?

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15. What do you think of Fury O'Shea as a character? Is he a lonely man or do you see him as self-sufficient? What do you think of his relationship with The Devil? How do you think the author "uses" him in the book?
16. Can you describe Fury's relationship with Brian? Do you think that sharing a physical task makes it easier for people to talk to each other – gardening, for example, or quilting, or working on a building together, as Brian and Fury do?
17. Brian wants Hanna to marry him, and she doesn't want to re-marry. Why do you think their attitudes are different? How much have they both learned about this by the end of the book?
18. If Fury were working for you, would you find his idiosyncrasies attractive or annoying? How is his bossiness different to Bríd's or Mary's? Are there well-respected tradespeople with a similar role to Fury's in your community? Do you empathize with his respect for craftsmanship from the past?
19. Have you ever been to Ireland or to London? How different might Hanna's life be if she'd stayed in London and not married Malcolm? Do you think Amy is right to say that Hanna has "stagnated" in Lissbeg?
20. When Hanna comes home to Amy's with a new haircut and a new dress, Amy calls her "Cinderella". There's a second echo of the Cinderella story in Hanna's choice of *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* as a parting gift for Amy. Did you find other fairy-tale references in *The Heart of Summer*? Why do you think the author included them?
21. "... places seem to hold the memory of past generations. Everyone who's ever lived and died there." At the end of *The Heart of Summer*, Hanna thinks about memories – lost, recovered, reassessed, and passed on. Have you ever felt that places retain memory? Is there one special place that has your heart?