



# THE SUMMER BOY

PHILIPPE BESSON

## TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The story begins with a snippet from the present, before jumping into the summer of 1985. As the narrator reflects on nostalgia and lingering guilt, he asks the reader “why the most beautiful stories must end badly.” How would you respond to this question? Can you relate to these feelings in your own life?
2. Before Philippe reaches the island, he ponders the heart-wrenching feeling that accompanies losing people before transitioning to another stage of life, in this case moving on to the next phase of school. Now that you have read the novel, and know the dramatic events that are about to take place, how do you think Philippe’s innocence and sensitivity set up what is to come that summer?
3. After Philippe meets up with his close friend François, they discuss François’s attraction to a tourist on the beach. Philippe describes the desire felt by an eighteen-year-old boy: “the desire to make use of their brand-new body... It has no shame.” How does Philippe confront his desires as a gay teenager in 1980s France as opposed to how François confronts his own as a straight teenager?
4. In Philippe’s initial interaction with Nicolas, Philippe feels as if his own words sound like he is talking down to an “inferior,” and they have “the same clunking sonority as a coin tossed in the plastic cup of a homeless person.” How does this first meeting set up the divide between Philippe and the boys living on the island?
5. As the group goes to meet Christophe, Philippe recalls a photograph of François and Christophe, which “told a story of friendship . . . protected from the world beyond.” In what ways do you see the boys on the island as being protected unlike Philippe or newcomer Nicolas?
6. Before going to meet Alice in Saint-Martin, Philippe looks back on how “wonderfully malleable” they were as teenagers before life sucked them into “its spiral of futility.” Do you believe the other boys have the same reflections on their youth and adulthood? Why or why not?
7. When the boys first meet up with Alice, why do you think Philippe wants to make such a clear declaration that he is not like Marc and Alice?

8. Reflecting on his feelings for Marc, Philippe talks about the “gray zone” and the exhaustion he experienced as a young gay teenager exploring his sexuality in the 1980s, noting that “we preferred the company of our friends to possible romantic partners.” How might this early suppression of desire and personal freedom influence Philippe’s relationships with his friends and with others later in life?
9. In an intimate conversation with Nicolas, Philippe shared his thoughts about ending his life after Thomas left, which Nicolas calls “beautiful.” What does Nicolas’s reaction to this admission tell you about his character, and how does this foreshadow what’s to come?
10. When François speaks about Nicolas, he puts him down, asserting himself as the “alpha” on the island. However, in Alice’s eyes, François is just “the butcher’s apprentice.” How do you see Alice’s perception as an outsider affecting François’s confidence?
11. While spending time with Virginie, Philippe shares his desire for a closer family, and that he will spend his life “inventing proximities, attachments, and affections to substitute for family ties.” In what other ways do you see Philippe reaching out for familial connection, either with the boys or with François’s family?
12. During Philippe and Marc’s first one-on-one, we see how they seem to have nothing in common, but their desire supersedes their lack of shared experience. How do you see this operating in the interactions between François and Alice, or Alice and Nicolas?
13. When Nicolas first disappears on the dance floor, Philippe’s inner voice keeps telling him something is wrong. Why do you think Philippe senses this but the other teenagers in the group do not?
14. After hearing from Nicolas’s mom that he didn’t come home the night before, Philippe feels weighed down by immaturity and cowardice. Why do you think Philippe was too “cowardly” to do more to find his friend at the dance club? At the police station when the group is silent, do you think the other teenagers feel the same cowardice and guilt as Philippe?
15. Philippe reflects that at eighteen one lives in the moment without paying attention to details, and that young people do not know the darkness of the human soul quite yet. Do you agree? How do you think the group would have acted on the night of the disappearance if they had been adults?
16. Philippe’s perspective on Nicolas’s personality changes as he reflects on it, and he begins to see Nicolas’ shyness as fear, his gentleness as fragility. Why do you think Philippe didn’t pick up on these nuances earlier in the story, and has your perception of Nicolas’s personality also changed as a reader?
17. Philippe said that Nicolas taught him the preciousness of life. What else do you think he learned from him? What did you learn from the story?

## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. In the author’s previous book, *Lie with Me*, we see Philippe’s relationship with Thomas, something that is frequently mentioned in *The Summer Boy*. Discuss how the relationship in *Lie with Me* might have affected Philippe’s connections with the boys on the island.
2. Given how much has changed since the ’80s, how do you think the case would have been handled had it happened today? Do you think Nicolas would have been treated differently?
3. What are some of your favorite novels or short stories that remind you of *The Summer Boy*, whether in setting, mood, plot, or character?

