



The Magic Summer

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An adventurous summer with four children visiting their eccentric great aunt in the Irish countryside.

The Magic Summer Details

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From Reader Review The Magic Summer for online ebook

Girl with her Head in a Book says

Review originally published here: <http://girlwithherheadinabook.co.uk/2...>

A little while ago, I wrote a list about Why I Love Noel Streatfeild and concluded that I should follow my own advice and read more of her. *The Growing Summer* was a book that I longed for but which was never in the bookshop. Aged ten, I even tried ordering it but alas it was out of print. My interest was tantalised when I heard a Radio 4 adaptation in my early teens. However, it was only when I finally resorted to Amazon (the shame!) that I finally managed to track down a second-hand copy. I have been looking for this book for almost two decades. Thank goodness it was good.

The four Gareth children are Alex, Penny, Robin and Naomi. Their life is predictably middle class and respectable until one day their father announces that he is going off into the middle East to further his scientific research into germs and epidemics. After a brief panic about being abandoned by both parents, the children settle down with the vaguely-realised intention to 'be good' and to 'help Mother'. However events get rather complicated when word comes that Daddy has been taken terribly ill and that Mummy needs to go to be with him. With all of their mother's family in New Zealand and the majority of their father's family having died in the Blitz, there is only one option about where the children can go with their mother away – Great-Aunt Dymphna. A figure of mystery, it was she who took in Daddy after his parents' death and the children have only the vaguest notions of what she is like – she disapproved of any medicines she had not grown herself, she would disappear for days at a time leaving Daddy to catch and eat his own food, she had escaped from war-torn France with only a hold-all. Right from the get-go, the children are apprehensive.

Posted off to Ireland with all their clothes in order to be prepared for any occasion, the Gareths arrive in the airport to find – horrors – there is nobody to collect them. When Aunt Dymphna finally does show her face, she looks 'more like a bird' than a person, wearing an enormous black cape and not behaving in any way that the children expect an aunt to behave. Added to all this, she drives like a maniac, shouting 'Road Hog' at anyone who gets in her way and disobeying any conceivable kind of highway code. The children have the vague hope that upon arrival at Aunt Dymphna's home Reenmore that the situation will regulate itself but the house is gloomy and decrepit and the wing the Aunt is putting them up in hasn't been lived in for years. When asked whether there are any toys, Aunt Dymphna is mystified, there is all the Irish countryside to explore! When the Gareths ask who is going to cook for them, she is again surprised by their obtuseness – they will of course! For four cosseted children, the situation is absolutely ghastly. The bath water comes out brown, they are reduced to a diet of boiled eggs until Penny learns how to cook and then to cap it all, the annoying boy who was on the plane with them turns up claiming to be a Communist refugee who requires sanctuary from his persecutors. It's all a bit much to cope with.

I loved this book – it feels like a real change of pace for Streatfeild though. I was fascinated by how there is a real sense of a generational shift. *Ballet Shoes* seems to be taking place in the 1930s – there is a reference to how one of the Fossil sisters' shows finishes early due to the death of the King which meant that nobody really felt like going to the theatre. This means it must be happening around 1935. *Theatre Shoes* takes the action to mid-war with the Forbes children having no mother and a father who is Missing In Action. While the Fossils dealt with poverty, the Forbes are struggling with rationing. Flash forward to *The Painted Garden*, and the war is just over but the Winters children find America a massive culture shock after the privations to which Britain has become accustomed. We hear about what the Fossils have been doing in the background – Pauline is making it big in Hollywood, Posy's ballet company had to evacuate to America after the fall of

Czechoslovakia and Petrova flew planes but all three sisters felt guilty that they could not do more to help with the war and so donated money for scholarships to the Forbes children. For the Gareths children however, growing up in the 1960s, this is all the stuff of myth and legend – when they come across the hold-all that Aunt Dymphna used when fleeing France, they comment that it ought to be in a museum. Streatfeild appears to be highlighting how these post-war children just don't know they're born.

Aunt Dymphna is a glorious character – I think it was her that kept up my determination to track down a copy of this book even though it took quite so long. She communes with the seagulls which appear to give her up to date information about Daddy's condition – information which is generally repeated word for word several hours later by Mummy's telegrams. She eschews tea and most food that the Gareths believe to be in any way normal. She shouts out to dogs where she is going since she feels that they will stop barking once they know her intended destination and it appears to always work. While taking the children to church, she becomes very cross if the sermon goes over fifteen minutes and if the vicar so offends, she gets up and walks out. It is not hard to see how a television series was developed around her – I myself would have loved to hear more about her, indeed I was disappointed she spent so much time offstage. She could be infuriatingly obtuse, speaking often via the verse of Edward Lear and showing an unprecedented lack of interest in the children's concerns, but then she does remember word for word the text on the postcard the children find in her hold-all, the message from her brother inviting her to stay dated only weeks before the bomb that killed him.

There is a good deal of moaning that goes on about Aunt Dymphna's relaxed attitudes, her infuriating habit of answering any query in the form of verse and her overall laissez-faire approach to guardianship – the children are quite convinced that they are being poorly treated. Naomi kicks up a fuss and throws tantrums, Robin moans, Penny frets and worries and Alex pretends to be in charge. Yet, one by one, they come to see things differently. One of Aunt Dymphna's verses refer to having heard Naomi's moaning voice constantly since she arrived in her home and Naomi is startled. She has grown up knowing that she is the 'pretty one' of the family and because of this feels that people should try to please her – but she quietly decides that she does not want to be known as a moaner. Alex agrees to Aunt Dymphna that Penny's worrying is excessive but Aunt Dymphna replies that the worrying would cease if the poor girl actually got some help. Although Alex had believed that he had been doing his bit by catching fish for dinner, he had resolutely left domestic chores to Penny as the girl and had complained about being expected to make his bed or pick up after himself. He quickly sees how he has been wrong. There is a neat parallel to all of this though in that as the children realise what a pain they have been, they are simultaneously having to live with Stephan, the spoilt 'Communist refugee' who has set up home in one of the spare bedrooms and is not only refusing to leave but is also casting scorn on all of the food which is put in front of him. Each of the Gareths tell Stephan archly that he is 'horrid' and 'dreadfully rude' even while glumly doing their apparent duty by him and shielding him from their aunt but we can see how Aunt Dymphna's attitudes towards the Gareths reflect their feelings toward Stephan. Things reach a show-down when Stephan is discovered and the children are scolded furiously by Oona who tells them angrily that they have been incredibly foolish, and ungrateful to their aunt who never wanted them to stay but has done her best by them all the same.

It is quite a thing for a child these days to be told that they are a burden. Streatfeild is capturing the rise of the our universal praise culture – where a child has to be told that they are wonderful no matter how they behave, that their work is brilliant no matter how hap-hazardly or how lazily they have set about it, that they need do nothing, never try, that life will just come together for them. This is an attitude that was never supported by any of Streatfeild's fiction – if you want something in her books, you have to work for it. It is not that the author is suggesting that the children deserve mistreatment, far from it, but rather that one ought to appreciate it when somebody goes out of their way for you. Streatfeild points out explicitly in *The Growing Summer* that it does Penny no harm to learn to cook, for Alex to tidy up or fish, for Naomi to learn to

entertain herself, for Robin to go in the fishing-boat in the dark. They all grew up a bit and nobody died (not even Daddy Gareth – unsurprisingly, he turns out to be fine). They even came to realise that they were not so very special, recognising as they got ready for departure that the most likely thing was that their new friends in the area would likely forget them quickly, only dim recollections remaining and no names. As they bid their once despised aunt farewell, there is a real sense of poignancy as she vanishes in the airport just as abruptly as she appeared, and we sense the tragedy that they will most likely never see her again. The Growing Summer is a novel about carping the diem, about being the best possible version of yourself and about remembering to be grateful – as such, it is a book well worth sharing, highly recommended!

Margaret says

I first read this as a pre-teen while living in England, and still find the story fascinating and the setting on the Irish coast absorbing. One of Streatfeild's better books, and without the "shoes" theme of so many.

Kay says

"The Growing summer" reminded me about growing up with my brothers and sisters. Its a great narrative about a family growing up in Ireland and the mischief the kids get up to. Brilliantly written. I have read it several times.

Katie Fitzgerald says

The four Gareth children - Alex, Penny, Robin, and Naomi - live in a house in London called "Medway" with their mother and scientist father. They are surprised enough when their father decides to go away for a year to study epidemics; when he falls ill and their mother must rush quickly to his side, they are thrown for a complete loop. With little time to prepare, the children are sent off to Ireland to spend the summer with their great-aunt Dymphna, who many years before looked after their father after the loss of his parents during World War II. Aunt Dymphna, who lives in "Reenmore," a house filled with books and other items she purchases from flea markets, is an eccentric old lady who values none of the comforts to which the children are so accustomed. She expects the children to cook and clean and to look after and entertain themselves. Though the Gareths have some help in the form of kind and generous neighbors, they are mostly on their own to figure things out, as Aunt Dymphna typically responds to requests for help with cryptic lines of verse and nothing more. To complicate matters further, the children also find themselves hiding a possible fugitive - a boy named Stephan who wears dark glasses - in one of Aunt Dymphna's bedrooms, fearing that if they don't help him, he will meet with a dangerous end.

This book is quite different from Streatfeild's earlier works. Whereas her titles from the '30s and '40s didn't seem to match a particular formula, this book is much like many other family stories of the 1960s, including those by Elizabeth Enright, to whom the story is dedicated. The main difference between this book and others of its type seems to be in the character of Aunt Dymphna, whose mysterious larger-than-life personality makes her unique among the adults who populate children's books. Aunt Dymphna is a force to be reckoned with, and despite the children's frustrations with her behavior, she never changes, or softens, or

apologizes for making the children's visit difficult. She remains who she is, for better or for worse, even to the last moment of the story. It is because of this steadfastness in the character of Aunt Dymphna, and the way the children are forced to grow and change in order to make their time with her bearable, that leads me to dislike the American title for the book, *The Magic Summer*, and to prefer instead the original British title, *The Growing Summer*. More than anything else, this is a story about kids who have been a bit spoiled learning how to look after themselves and to grow up in the absence of the kind sympathy of their parents. Aunt Dymphna herself may seem magical, but there is more blood, sweat, and tears in the kids' summer experience than magic.

The subplot involving the young boy with dark glasses, Stephan, who tells the children he has escaped from a Communist country is largely unnecessary and felt like a gimmick to keep kids interested rather than an integral part of the plot. Personally, I think there is plenty of great conflict in the book without Stephan, and I would have happily traded the pages spent on him for more late-night lobster hunts with Aunt Dymphna or a few more awkward exchanges about laundry between Penny and the neighbor women. Though the details of life at Reenmore are wonderfully evocative, and left me with a very clear picture of the setting for the story, I got to the end of the book feeling like I could have enjoyed more detail, not just about the house, but about the neighbor families, the local children, and even Aunt Dymphna's history. It's not that the book doesn't feel complete; I just liked the setting so much, I could have happily spent more time there.

While I think *Ballet Shoes* is still my favorite Streatfeild title, this book was a treat and I happily read the whole thing in one sitting. It's interesting to see how Streatfeild's writing evolved with the times, and yet remained distinctive as compared with other writers of books of the same genre. I won't forget Aunt Dymphna any time soon, and I look forward to learning about some of the poems she quoted with which I was not familiar. This was the perfect read for a rainy summer afternoon, and one I can enthusiastically recommend.

This review also appears on my blog, *Read-at-Home Mom*.

Beth says

This is BONKERS.

No, really: I have no words for how spectacularly crazy this book is. And I reread it the same day I reread *Far to Go*.

"The same day" = today. It has been a Streatfeild day. I have laughed at Miss Bloggs and pulled my hair out over Ma Mud and cheered for Lady Paine and (of all things) her lawyers. I have also marveled at how good Streatfeild can be: *Dancing Shoes* and *Family Shoes* are *great*, and the Gemma books have their moments.

But this book is insane. INSANE.

Rachel Brand says

I was really ill yesterday and after finishing 'White Boots' I decided to read another 'comfort read' by Streatfeild. This book was written in 1966 - the year my mum turned 2! - and it's obvious straight away that

Streatfeild has changed her style of writing a bit to fit the next generation of children. 'The Growing Summer' is a story about four children - aged between 9 and 14 - who are sent to stay with an obscure great aunt when their mother must go abroad to care for their ill father. The children are basically left to fend for themselves and 'grow' through learning how to be responsible, to prepare meals, to spend money wisely. They also have to make a tough decision when a strange boy turns up, claiming to have escape from a Communist country, asking to hide in their aunt's house. Reading this now it is obvious because of the boy's speech that he is pretending to be 'foreign' but I didn't guess this at all as a child. The character of the aunt is very amusing, and the odd, mixed up family which they become (aunt and four kids) reminds me of Hilary McKay's 'The Exiles' - I wonder if she got inspiration from 'The Growing Summer'? Anyway, overall, a really sweet story, definitely 10/10. I'm now going to go and reread 'Ballet Shoes' and 'The Painted Garden' - the only other Streatfeild books which my family own.

Georgia says

Delving into the children's books that I loved as a kid but are no longer in print, I started with this, a book I read repeatedly when I was younger. This book makes me hope that digital book platforms will finally stop books from going out of print, because it's a real shame that this book isn't read anymore. A story about four children who have to suddenly go to live with their crazy great aunt in a rundown house in Ireland and learn to take care of themselves, this book thoroughly dispels the idea that you have to have something magical or supernatural in a kids' book to make it a good, exciting read. The world is a fascinating place, full of experiences that are at least as interesting as anything Harry Potter might do, and it's really too bad that authors have forgotten that.

Sam says

This was a wonderful read! One of my top favorites by Noel Streatfeild! So adorably cute, and a perfect end-of-the-summer read. :) I found it really "magical"...the characters were lovable, and interesting.

Shawn Thrasher says

I don't think I'm a fan of Noel Streatfeild. I didn't particularly care for this book; I thought the characters were disjointed and the plot was unbelievable - and not in a magic way. The cover of this book says that it is "a story of mystery and adventure in Ireland" - which was patently untrue (at least to me).

Who I am a fan of is the illustrator, Edward Ardizzone - it was he who kept me reading until the end. I purchased this as a lovely old used library copy, and as an object of art, this is a beautiful book. Ardizzone's illustrations are elegant little pen and ink impressionistic portraits and scenes. I'm not suggesting skipping the book and just looking at the pictures. But I know I liked the pictures much better than the actual book.

7.27.18 I just finished Ballet Shoes. I was wrong about Noel Streatfeild. I started with the wrong book. I am now, most definitely, a fan.

Sally says

FAVOURITE SO MUCH. The house, the Aunt... oh my, yes.

Michael Fitzgerald says

In just a couple of generations, English schoolchildren have become soft. John, Susan, Roger, and Titty would be appalled to learn that their grandchildren are duffers - or worse! What to do!? Ship them off to Ireland and let good old Great-aunt Dymphna sort them out, not by really instructing them, but more by letting them free-range it as much as possible. The kids develop and mature in more ways than one. I still think they'd probably drown if left on their own for real, but it's a start. The original British title *The Growing Summer* is much better than the American (*The Magic Summer*), as it is growing that is the essence of the story.

This has quite a bit in common with Ransome, such as *The Picts & the Martyrs* or *Not Welcome at All*, but there are definite differences. The interactions with adults are very interesting. At one point there are some rather harsh words, which I don't think we get in Ransome. His adults seem to be more sympathetic at all times (I suppose the initial conflict with Captain Flint might be an exception).

Happily, there weren't a lot of references that reveal the 1960s time period (only once there is the briefest mention of Beatles songs). The absent parents are frequently mentioned, and we get regular updates. This didn't really thrill me, but I suppose it is more realistic for the time.

I don't know about Stephan. I wasn't crazy about the bit of intrigue that was included - I'd be perfectly happy to have a lovely tale of a simple summer in Ireland where there is no sense of time (the book is dedicated to Elizabeth Enright, a marvelous summer writer), but I suppose it served a purpose in presenting a character to show that the Gareths weren't all that bad, after all. I also feel that maybe this subplot was there as a nod to Streatfeild's earlier *Shoes* tales of child stars. The Gareths' sometimes hostile treatment of Stephan is another example of behavior that goes past the Ransome level.

I loved the literary allusions and how vital they were to how the kids grow. I've collected all of them (below). Aunt Dymphna is a marvelous character (in all senses of that word), and I was so glad to see that the Gareths appreciated her in the end.

Edward Ardizzone, as always, does a fine job of the illustrations.

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Poems, rhymes, plays, and songs quoted or mentioned:

Edward Lear: *The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo* (p.74,75,76,188,189,219,258,261,268,269)

William Allingham: *The Fairies* (p.102,103,219,258,269)

Doctor Foster Went to Gloucester (p.117)

Thomas Rymer (p.118)

Edward Lear: *The Jumblies* (p.132,206,226)

Georgie Porgie (p.133)

Samuel Goodrich: *Higgledy-Piggledy Pop* (p.134)

Pop Goes the Weasel (p.141)
Robert Browning: Rabbi Ben Ezra (p.141)
Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary (p.141)
William Shakespeare: Ariel's Song (p.141)
Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Mask (p.142)
Sing a Song of Sixpence (p.142)
Robert Louis Stevenson: Sing Me a Song of a Lad That Is Gone (p.142)
Goosey Goosey Gander (p.142)
Arthur O'Shaughnessy: Ode (p.142)
Robert Louis Stevenson: Romance (p.142,169,253,258,268)
Lewis Carroll: The Hunting of the Snark (p.166, 167,172,173)
Cecil F. Alexander: All Things Bright and Beautiful (p.177,223)
William Shakespeare: Song: Where the Bee Sucks, There Suck I (p.178)
Monday's Child Is Fair of Face (p.186)
Rudyard Kipling: Our Fathers of Old (p.187,197,253)
Rudyard Kipling: Cold Iron (p.194,197)
Lewis Carroll: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (p.196)
Lewis Carroll: The Voice of the Lobster (p.200,227)
Edward Lear: The Owl and the Pussy-Cat (p.203,205)
G. K. Chesterton: The Song of Quoodle (p.221)
How Many Miles to Babylon? (p.222)
Alfred, Lord Tennyson: Sweet and Low (p.223,224,258,269)
Hilaire Belloc: The Early Morning (p.228)
William Shakespeare: The Tempest, Act II (p.254)
Barber, Barber, Shave a Pig (p.261)
William Shakespeare: A Midsummer Night's Dream, Act 5 (p.269)

Also referenced are two books:

Isabella Beeton: Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management: (p.188,189,192,249,250,251)
Sir Walter Scott: Ivanhoe (p.188,189,207)

Hilary says

Four children are sent from London to live for the summer with an eccentric poetry quoting Aunt in a rural part of Ireland. They are left to fend for themselves and in the process find friendship and enjoyment in day to day tasks. The children find that there are things to gain from their self sufficient life, and a mystery unfolds. The freedom they enjoyed and the descriptions of endless summer days on the beach were lovely. Our favourite Noel Streatfeild so far. Beautiful illustrations by Edward Ardizzone.

Sue says

Alex and his three siblings live in London. In the first chapter their father sets off for a year's international travel. Then disaster strikes, and the children are sent to live with their eccentric Great Aunt Dymphna. She

drives like a maniac, lives in a cluttered house, and doesn't cook regular meals. The children are expected to cook on an ancient stove, to catch fish and collect firewood, and generally be self-sufficient.

Most of the book is about the children's gradual changes and growth over the summer. They all have to be resourceful and to pull together as a family. Sometimes they wonder if Aunt Dymphna is completely crazy.

The writing is good, the characterisation excellent, and my only niggle was that it ends quite abruptly. I'd have liked another chapter, tying ends up more neatly and seeing what might happen in the future.

Still, overall I enjoyed it. It's a good introduction to Noel Streatfeild for boys as well as girls, and nicely lacking in super-talented dancers or actors.

Susann says

Even without m'auditions and the like, Streatfeild writes a great family story. I'm not sure if the story needs the Stephan plotline, but my kid self probably would have enjoyed it. Love the Irish setting and the grit+poetry of Great-Aunt Dymphna.

Dedication reads: "For Elizabeth Enright because I so greatly admire her books"

Katrina says

This one was made into a TV serial in 1969, I wish I had seen it then.
<https://piningforthewest.co.uk/2018/0...>
