

Your Next Book Club Read

“Engaging and nostalgic. Doan’s writing sweeps you away to the high-speed, sun-soaked backdrop of nineties California.”

—HELEN HOANG,
author of *The Kiss Quotient*

“A beautifully crafted story of love, ambition, and friendship.”

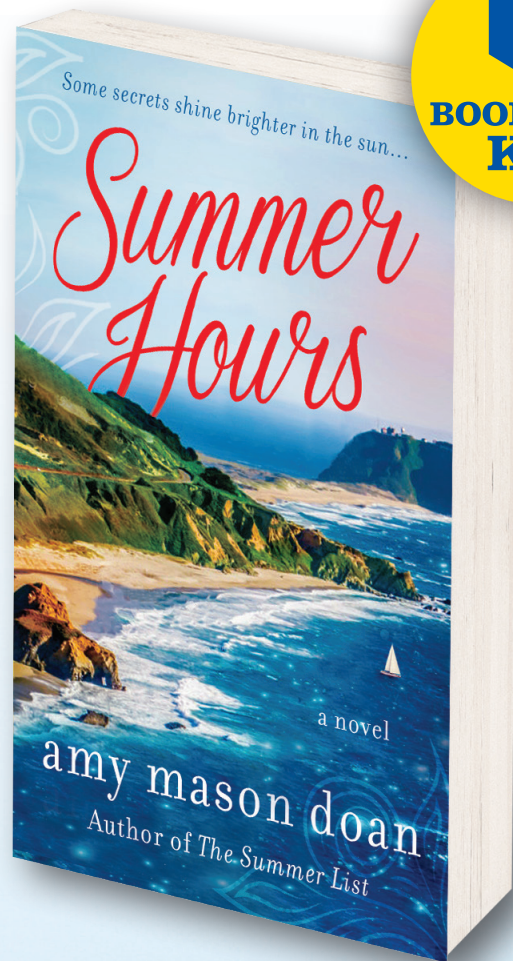
—JAMIE BRENNER,
bestselling author of
The Forever Summer and *Drawing Home*

***Commencement* meets *The Graduate* in this sparkling novel about a secret affair, the summer it all unravels, and the reunion a decade later that will be one woman’s happy ending or her biggest mistake.**

Becc was the good girl. A dedicated student. Aspiring reporter. Always where she was supposed to be. Until a secret affair with the charming Cal one summer in college cost her everything she held dear: her journalism dreams; her relationship with her best friend, Eric; and her carefully imagined future.

Now, Becc’s past is back front and center as she travels up the scenic California coast to a wedding—with a man she hasn’t seen in a decade. As each mile flies by, Becc can’t help but feel the thrilling push and pull of memories, from infinite nights at beach bonfires and lavish boat parties to secret movie sessions. But the man beside her is not so eager to re-create history. And as the events of that heartbreaking summer come into view, Becc must decide if those dazzling hours they once shared are worth fighting for or if they’re lost forever.

Set in the mid ’90s and 2008, Amy Mason Doan’s *Summer Hours* is a warmly told novel about the idealism of youth, the seductive power of nostalgia and what happens when you realize you haven’t become the person you’d always promised to be.



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Discussion Questions



1. The title *Summer Hours* has multiple meanings in the novel: in the 1990s thread, it's the name of Cal's boat and refers to the hours Becc and Eric play hooky from their jobs. In the 2008 thread, the title captures the carefree hours of youth. What does the phrase mean to you?
2. In the novel, characters like Becc and Eric are worried they might be "selling out." How does this notion of selling out shape their actions and decisions in positive or negative ways? What does the phrase selling out mean to you? Is it just an idealistic term, or do you think there is a way to balance dreams and professional realities in life?
3. Discuss Cal as a character. Did you understand why Becc was drawn to him?
4. Contrast Becc's relationships with Cal and Eric. How was Becc a different person in each relationship? Who did you feel was better for her?
5. Does Becc face more lingering consequences from the affair than Cal? Why do you think that is? Do you think she should have regretted their relationship more, or did she ultimately gain something from it?
6. Like the book/movie *The Graduate*, *Summer Hours* features a love triangle, but in this case, a woman is at the point. How does the author subvert gender tropes in both the 1990s and 2008 threads?
7. Why do you think Becc feels the need to lie or bend the truth in her letters to Francine Haggermaker? Does Francine give Becc any reason to fear her disapproval? Were you surprised by the revelation that Francine was also secretly subversive—much like the Feline Collective—in her youth?
8. Discuss the Feline Collective and its mission to expose sexual harassment on campus. Despite the '90s setting, did that element of the story resonate with you as a reader today? What has changed in society's approach to sexual harassment?
9. Discuss the older generation of women in the novel: Becc's mom, Eric's mom (Donna), Francine (scholarship granter), and Yvonne (Serra's art mentor and the force behind the Feline Collective). How did your view of these women evolve over the course of the story? How did these characters affect the younger generation of women in the novel?
10. Journalism, movies, and art play a big role in this novel. How do the changes we see in these fields in the 1990s narrative reflect the characters' own coming-of-age journeys?



Discussion Questions

11. *Summer Hours* explores the journalism industry both in the '90s, which was the beginning of the internet revolution, and in 2008. Compare the journalism context we see through Becc's professional path to the ways people get news today. Do you think the changes have been positive, negative, or both?

12. Were you happy Becc and Eric ended up together, at least for the near future? Or do you think it's best to leave the past in the past?



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Author Q&A

Photo credit: Briana Sash



1. What inspired you to write *Summer Hours*?

My first job out of college was writing dry newsletters for a commercial real estate firm. I was so miserable that I used to sneak off to matinees in the middle of the day to meet a friend who was also in despair over his career. We knew we were lucky to have any paycheck, and we knew it was bratty and wrong to ditch work, but we got addicted to those covert movie outings. We even developed a complex secret e-mail code like the one Becc and Eric use to plan their meetups.

I still remember the movies we saw, the scorched-butter smell of the theaters, the nubby upholstery of the seats. And I remember how our subterfuge, childish as it felt, gave us hope and a sense of control when we desperately needed it. These memories were the seeds of the story.

2. Why did you choose the title *Summer Hours*?

Cal's boat was called the *Summer Hours* for a long time before I settled on the title. He thinks of himself as a rebel and that appeals to Becc. *Summer Hours* also fits the story perfectly because it all takes place in summer, and every chapter in the novel includes people playing hooky or, to put it charitably, setting their own highly flexible work hours.

Summer Hours ultimately mean something bigger to Becc. She realizes near the end that it was in her secret moments, the times she slipped away from where she was supposed to be, that she was most free to define who she was. As an adult in 2008, she recaptures some of that exhilaration and is ultimately able to reconnect with her younger self.

3. In what ways did your own experiences as a newbie journalist in the '90s inform the novel?

I graduated from journalism school and started writing for print newspapers and magazines right when the Internet started transforming the industry. It's hard to believe now, but back then Web editors used to prowl the cubicles begging reporters to "file something for online" once they'd met their print deadlines. The Internet was considered an extra and wasn't taken all that seriously. Then corporate takeovers and competition from free online media outlets made us wonder if print newspapers had any future at all.

Like Becc, I was extremely idealistic. I'd grown up in a household that subscribed to two daily papers, and I worshiped reporters like Nellie Bly and Edward R. Murrow, so it was hard for me to see veteran reporters getting laid off, to watch some sites blurring the line between news and advertising, and to hear that journalism was no longer a profession that required skills or standards—that anyone with a keyboard and an Internet connection could do it.



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Journalists aren't perfect, but when I see people today wearing T-shirts that say "Rope. Tree. Journalist. Some Assembly Required," I want to ask them, Without reporters, would you know that smoking causes cancer? Would you know about Watergate? If your city council member was taking kickbacks? Certain politicians have vilified the media and weaponized the public's desire for simple, entertaining stories because without the media to check them, they can lie with impunity.

But I remain an idealist. I see journalists doing extraordinary work—risking their lives and fighting to get the truth out there because it matters. And I think that *Summer Hours* is ultimately a hopeful novel, because Becc devotes her life to digging up facts that would otherwise remain hidden. She's still got that respect for the truth inside her.

4. **Why did you include so many movie references in the novel?**

They're Eric's verbal tic and I'm as obsessed with movies as he is! The '90s movies give some texture to the story because they bring us back to that era.

But on a deeper level, movies give us a taste of other lives, so Becc and Eric escape into films when reality disappoints them.

5. **Were Francine's "activities" during the 1950s based on true events in any way?**

The 1950s Communist blacklist is obviously real, and blacklisted screenwriters like Dalton Trumbo and Norma Barzman continued secretly working in the film industry via pseudonyms, fronts, or sympathetic producers. But the idea of someone systematically inserting secret messages into blacklisted writers' films via tell-tale props is fictional—at least as far as I know. I'd love to find out otherwise.

Francine is such a steely, wise character. She'd be part of the resistance no matter her age. To me, her youthful actions are a form of graffiti that resembled the Feline Collective's. They both protest injustice and try to get the truth out via unconventional means.

6. **Why did you choose to include a plot that touched upon sexism and sexual harassment?**

I wrote much of the book during the genesis of the #MeToo movement, but the Feline Collective was part of the plot for years before that. When I was in college we all read feminist 'zines, so it felt natural for Serra to be part of an underground feminist network. Feminism certainly became a bigger part of my characters' world as #MeToo took off and I grappled with the chauvinism and harassment I'd experienced throughout my life—like so many women are doing right now.

While Cal seems like a good guy and he and Becc are both adults when they get together, Becc ultimately learns he's not an ally. He laughs off Derrek Schwinn's behavior. That "boys' club" behavior, subtle and unconscious as it may be, is insidious. And I thought it was realistic that Cal would "sail away" while Becc would have to deal with the consequences of their affair for decades.

But as with the journalism themes in the novel, I think this part of the story is ultimately hopeful. Francine, who Becc is so sure will side with the powerful men, turns out to be a formidable ally. Women have each other's backs and when they rise up together, they're a powerful force.



Summer Hours & Summer Matinees: The Movies that Shaped My Second Novel

by Amy Mason Doan

In my second novel, *Summer Hours*, best friends Becc and Eric cope with adulthood by escaping together—to the beach, on road trips and, often, to the movies. Eric, an aspiring filmmaker, is so passionate about movies he creates a screening room in his closet to block out his parents' fights. Later, Becc and Eric even sneak out from their depressing first jobs to the movies—a coping mechanism that *might* be inspired by my own experiences. As a movie fanatic myself, I chose every film reference in the novel with obsessive care, often discarding ten potential titles before landing on the perfect one for each scene. Like *Summer Hours*, all of the movies feature strong female characters.

Here are my five favorites:

1. **THE GRADUATE (1967)**

"I'm just a little worried about my future." (Ben)

I cheated slightly on this one, because while there's a winking reference to an "Anne Bancroft film festival" in *Summer Hours*, *The Graduate* is never directly mentioned. But *The Graduate* inspired me when I sat down to draft this novel years ago. I went to UC Berkeley, where much of the movie was filmed, and even lived across the street from the fraternity house where Ben's conservative rival lived. *Summer Hours* is a feminist, contemporary spin on the age-old conflict in *The Graduate*—I'm afraid of turning into my parents—and decades later, the movie is as beautiful, smart and bittersweet to me as ever.

2. **HIS GIRL FRIDAY (1940)**

"If you want me, Bruce, you've gotta take me as I am instead of trying to change me into something else. I'm no suburban bridge player. I'm a newspaperman. Darn it." (Hildy)

Protagonist Becc is an idealistic and intrepid young reporter in *Summer Hours*. She worships Nellie Bly and loves hunting down the truth, and though she sees the changes rocking the industry in the '90s, she never completely gives in to cynicism about her profession. *His Girl Friday* is a classic screwball comedy about newspaper reporters with an important message at its core—truth matters. Becc feels a kinship with Rosalind Russell's Hildy character, a fiercely independent career woman. I adore Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant's lightning-fast banter in this film.

3. **TRULY, MADLY, DEEPLY (1991)**

"And when we kissed, which was about eleven o'clock the following morning, we were trembling so much we couldn't take off our clothes." (Jamie)

I have probably watched *Truly, Madly, Deeply* ten times since it came out in 1991. It's an unabashedly romantic story about a recently deceased man (the late, beloved Alan Rickman) who haunts his lover (brilliant Juliet Stevenson), and observes with great pain her halting attempts to move on with her life. In *Summer Hours*, Becc sobs when her best friend, Eric, first screens the film for her in his bedroom closet. He says to Becc quietly, of the movie's emotional power—"I know, right? Just perfect." This vulnerable moment shows how unselfconscious and genuine they are together, and how Eric is not the goofball he pretends to be when he's hurting. It's also the first hint of the pure love that's unspoken between them. It's a funny, sweet, elegiac and moving film. I dare you not to cry during the last scene.



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4. **GROSSE POINTE BLANK (1997)**

*Martin: "I'm sorry if I f***ed up your life."*

Debi: "It's not over yet."

Grosse Pointe Blank is one of the many movies Becc and Eric see during their frequent "extended lunch hours" when they're playing hooky from their dismal first jobs after college. It's about a hitman (John Cusack) and his long-lost love (Minnie Driver), reuniting at their ten-year high school reunion. The movie is dark, hilarious and biting, but surprisingly romantic. I also included it because *Summer Hours* includes high school friends and lovers reuniting after ten years.

5. **THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI (1948)**

*"From that moment on, I did not use my head very much, except to be thinking of her."
(Michael)*

Becc and Eric see the classic Rita Hayworth film noir *The Lady from Shanghai* the summer that Becc is trying desperately to resist her long-simmering attraction to Eric. They are millimeters away from holding hands...but then an image of Sausalito on the screen jerks Becc back to reality. Sausalito, across the Bay from Berkeley, is the location of her clandestine trysts with the smooth, irresistible older man Eric has hated since boyhood, and seeing the Sausalito pier reminds Becc why she and Eric can never be a couple. Or can they?

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Summer Hours

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