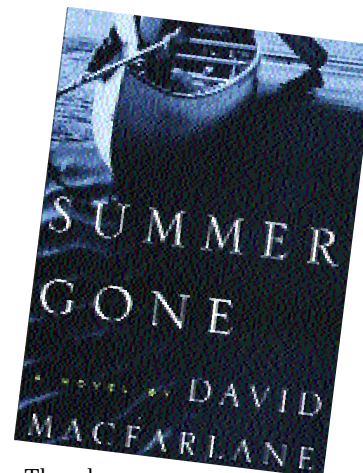


Summer Gone

By David Macfarlane
Crown Publishers, 1999

You don't have to be Canadian to love *Summer Gone*. Nor do you have to be a father, a son, an editor, or an actuary, although all are elements in this lyrical novel by Canadian

author David Macfarlane. What matters most, after you've turned the last page and closed the book, is Macfarlane's sense of place and time and the glorious language he uses to evoke it.



The place is northern Ontario, the time is summer. Bay Newling, the editor of a prominent Canadian weekly magazine, is taking his disaffected teenaged son Caz on a canoe trip in the Waubano Reaches. Bay has twice before made this summer trek into the pristine glory of the Canadian Shield—as a youth attending a boys summer camp and in a memorable family vacation when Caz was six.

Now divorced and smoking way too much, Bay hopes the trip will forge new connections to his son, and to his past. “It was the way memory curved back through time, the way hope reached forward, that made summer seem enduring. It was the steady accumulation of summers past and summers yet to come that saved the present from being over as soon as it began. Past, future. Past, future. It made the holidays seem—hiking windward on a blue and whitecapped day, paddling through the sundown sheen of an evening's calm, reading a good book on a crib-lapped dock, lying on a rock in what was once the wholesome, health-giving sun—as if they would last forever.”

But connection is a mixed blessing. The trip, punctuated by Bay's and Caz's wilderness mishaps (neither is a particularly accomplished canoeist), lays open the seams of Bay's casual betrayal of his marriage when Caz was six and the consequences that continue to ripple from that unthinking summer dalliance. It also revives memories of Bay's strained relationship with his own father, an actuary whose professional trajectory was

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disappointingly flat.

Perhaps inevitably, Bay would have preferred a father more like the ones found in fiction—say, Fenton Hardy from the Hardy Boys. “He used to try to picture his own father looking up from his sheets of incomprehensible figures. He imagined Sandy Newling speaking in the collegial tone that the famous detective always used when he was about to entangle his boys in some great mystery. He imagined his father—his direct gaze sparkling—suggesting, through the convivial smoke of this straight-stemmed pipe, that perhaps Bay could help him with a difficult and possibly dangerous actuarial problem he’d been working on.”

For actuaries reading this book, there will be a special poignancy in Macfarlane’s descriptions of the sacrifices Sandy Newling made while studying for actuarial exams, the family time put on hold. They’ll find resonance, I suspect, in Macfarlane’s characterization of evaluation actuary Sandy Newling: “He believed in numbers. Things added up. Bay, who had some difficulty with arithmetic in school, was always impressed with this. The wood his father cut on his work bench was precisely the length required. If he bought something at the hardware store, he did the tax in his head, and plunked down the precise change before the cash register rang it up.”

Macfarlane is a fluid and colloquial writer. Even mundane items, like Bay’s first pack of cigarettes, benefit from his description. “It was the whiteness of the papers that first impressed him. In the sunlight, in the bright heat of the day, the thin, perfect cylinders, offset by the elegantly folded, illusionary solidity of foil, were pristine and unblemished—white, like breaking surf, brilliant against the sandy brown of the filter.”

But Macfarlane’s topic is far larger than the incidentals he so carefully catalogues. There is mystery at the heart of this novel. Not just an actual mystery that most readers will figure out long before the book’s end but also the larger mystery of life. How, for moments in time and often in the summer, it can be at the same time almost impossibly beautiful and impossibly sad.

—Linda Mallon