

THE LAST SUMMER OF US

by MAGGIE HARCOURT



Teachers' Notes

Synopsis

The Last Summer of Us follows the life-changing road trip taken by three close friends, each on the brink of adulthood, each grappling with huge emotional turmoil: sixteen-year-old Limpet's alcoholic mum has just died and her dad is battling the same illness; Steffan has lost his mum to cancer, while Jared's dad is in prison for attempted murder. Shortly after Limpet's mum's funeral, they squeeze themselves into Steffan's clapped-out "rust bucket" and set off across the stunning Carmarthenshire coast, reeling with Steffan's revelation that he's about to move to LA as a result of his wealthy dad being headhunted for a new job. And so a cloud of impending, immutable change looms heavy as they begin their momentous journey...

During the course of the trip, and amidst much affectionate mickey-taking, all three friends confront their anxieties and gradually remove the masks they've been hiding behind. Their journey takes them to a hostel near a surfers' beach, where Steffan is invited to play violin at a folk festival. That evening, a succession of pivotal disclosures and confrontations unfold. Limpet voices all the things she "couldn't bear to think about" (p. 213) and speaks honestly about her parents' drinking for the first time. And it emerges that Steffan isn't moving to LA because of his dad's flashy new job. Rather, he's moving because they're broke, thanks to Jared's dad, and a fight breaks out between the two boys.

Next morning, they stop off for Steffan to say a difficult goodbye at his mother's graveside and then head to the festival. While Steffan delivers an impassioned performance, Limpet and Jared entwine fingers, a declaration of their mutual romantic feelings. Their trip over, the friends have reached the end of this particular road. While they feel a sense of loss from knowing that their world will never be the same, the novel closes on a hopeful note. Limpet knows that they're on the brink of a whole new journey, on the edge of the rest of their lives.

Themes

The Last Summer of Us is a lyrical coming-of-age story that explores universally significant life events. Grief, and the process of grieving, is a central theme, from the rawness Limpet feels in the immediate aftermath of her mother's death, to Steffan's emotions one year on from losing his mother. The novel also looks at the challenges of making transitions, of letting go and moving on, of trying to piece one's life back together after it seems to have fallen apart.

Through Limpet, Jared and Steffan the author gracefully articulates how it feels to be on the brink of adulthood, yearning for freedom from familial constraints and troubles, and longing to find one's own way in the world.

And through them the reader experiences the complexities of close friendship; its joys and frustrations, the fierce loyalty and relentless ribbing, and the specialness of having people on your side who speak the truth when it needs to be heard. Truth and lies, secrecy and honesty are themselves wider themes of the novel. With each other's support, the three friends confront tough truths about what they feel, and who they are.

Writing style

The first-person, present tense narrative gives the novel an intense immediacy. The reader experiences the world and unfolding events through Limpet's eyes. Limpet's language is often lyrical and highly visual. She's attuned to the dramatic landscape of west Wales, and sensitive to the emotional states of those close to her. The writing also has a musical quality. The rolling rhythms of extended passages shift into short staccato phrases, creating counterpoints and space for reflection. The novel also features authentic dialogue and regional turns-of-phrase that further enrich the characterisation.



About the author

Maggie Harcourt was born and raised in Wales, where she grew up dreaming of summer road trips and telling stories for a living. As well as studying Medieval Literature at UCL, Maggie has variously worked as a PA, a hotel chambermaid and for a French chef before realising her dreams and beginning to write full time. She now lives just outside Bath, and still visits Wales to wander the Carmarthenshire beaches and countryside.

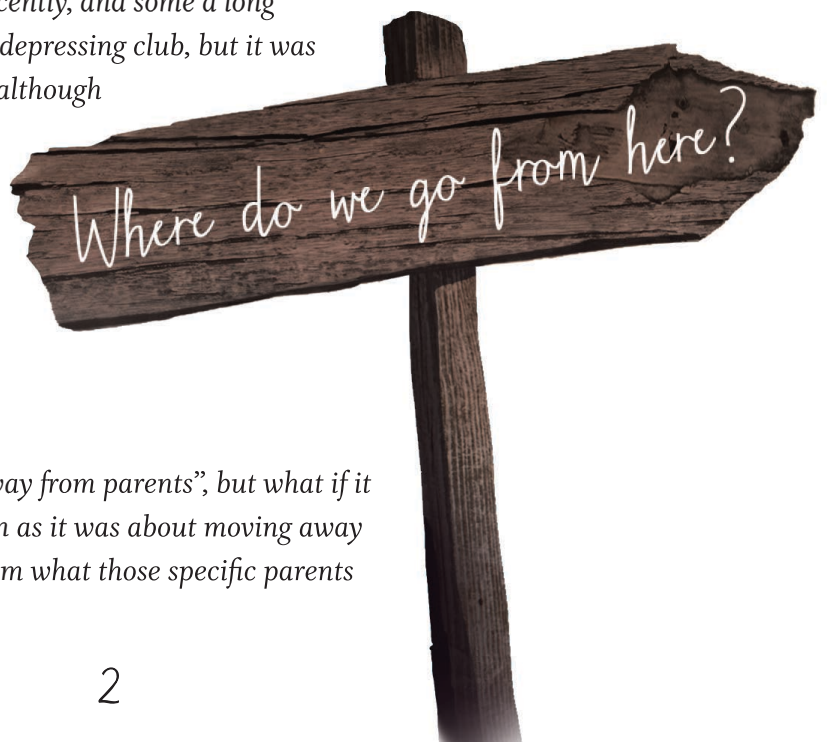
The Last Summer of Us is her first novel.

From the author

On the novel's gestation:

*I knew from very early on what Limpet would sound like - the others too - but I didn't really understand what to do with them. It was all very well sticking them in a car and having them drive around... but what were they **doing**? I didn't get that answer for a while. Then my own mother died and I'm not sure how but I found myself surrounded by people who had also lost their mothers: some recently, and some a long time ago. It was like being part of the world's most depressing club, but it was something we had in common. And I realised that although grief is a terribly isolating thing, knowing people who have gone through something similar can make it a little less so. Everyone I spoke to had different ways of dealing with their experiences; had **had** different experiences... and that's when I understood what it was that Limpet, Jared and Steffan had in common.*

I'd always wanted it to be a story about "getting away from parents", but what if it wasn't so much about escaping for a few days of fun as it was about moving away from the shadow that parents cast over us - and from what those specific parents had done, and what it meant?



On the west Wales setting:

If I hadn't grown up in west Wales, the book wouldn't be quite the way it is - not just because of the setting, but because of the mindset of the area. To start with, it's beautiful. It has gorgeous beaches and wonderful rolling hills. And lots of rain, too: there's a reason the grass is so green and so good for all the dairy herds, after all!

I grew up in a small town in the middle of a farming area, and every Thursday the cattle mart was held in the middle of town (it's since moved out to a bigger site and the old mart has been redeveloped as a shopping centre) and I used to love getting off the school bus one stop early and walking home past all the pens of calves, listening to the livestock farmers gossiping.

I suppose you could say it was an education in how small communities work. News travels fast, whether it's good or bad, and everyone knows everybody's business. Good luck keeping a secret somewhere like that, because someone, somewhere, somehow, will find it.

I had a few friends who lived on farms, too, and I used to love going out to see them because by the time we were in our mid-teens, that almost always meant driving around the farm on quad bikes. (I wasn't very good at it.) That's not to say that it's all glorious open countryside: if you've ever seen the film "Twin Town", set in Swansea, you'll understand what I mean.

It's also a very divided area: despite there being a lot of national pride, there's a distinct difference between those who speak Welsh and those who don't. Sometimes it causes problems and sometimes there's tension but it's usually a question of politics rather than anything personal.

On road trips:

I've always loved the idea of a road trip. I was always fascinated by the big American road trip when I was a teenager (and still am) and would love to do one of those in a big, classic American muscle car, however much of a cliché that makes me. There's something so freeing about the idea of just throwing a bag into a car and taking off with no real plan. I like the thought that a road trip can turn running away from something into running towards something else, too: the physical journey becomes something personal, something emotional.

Because it's outside the normal routes we take from home to school, or home to work, it has different rules. It's a different world: its own thing.



On music:

Music was a big part of writing 'The Last Summer of Us', because I can't imagine a car journey or a conversation when I was 16 or 17 that didn't have music (or arguing about it) at the heart of it. For my circle of friends, that came down to a competition between the bands that felt like they were ours: the Super Furry Animals, Catatonia, the Stereophonics... bands that were suddenly everywhere, but who came from places we knew (and who someone could usually claim to be a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend of) or trance. And never could the twain meet. But it's always like that: music becomes where we put our rivalries and our tribalism, whether it's boybands or searching out the rarest vinyls or meeting our best friends through bands (as I did, funnily enough, through a band's online forum!).

With a musician as one of the three main characters, it was going to be inevitable that music mattered to the book and a lot of what I had playing in the background as I wrote found its way into the playlists on Limpet's iPod. Some of the songs are just things I was listening to, some of them are Welsh bands because Limpet is Welsh, after all, and that counts for something! Some of them are echoes of what I wanted the book to be about: there are songs that, when you really listen to them, can be about grief, about friendship and about strength and hope - and whether you find it through your friends or through a road trip or through music, hope is what the story is ultimately about.



For discussion

1) Discuss the significance of the book's title. Think of three alternative titles.

2) The author has said that she wanted the novel to be about "moving away from the shadow that parents cast over us". What does she mean by this? Discuss in relation to either Limpet or Jared.

3) "You can't just... **drive**."

"Why not? That's the whole point of a road trip, isn't it? It's all about ... the journey" (p.29). Do you agree with Steffan that the journey is more important than the destination? How important is it to know where you're going?

4) "There it is. My little voice drifting up to the heavens, saying those three words I've been trying so hard not to say. **It's not fair**" (Limpet, p.61).

Why do you think Limpet has been trying not to voice these "three little words"?

5) "The poor thing is stuck here, with no choice but to stay put and wait for someone to want it... Trapped by his name, trapped by his circumstance... just trapped" Limpet p.126). To what extent does Limpet's comment about Piggy the elephant echo wider themes of the novel?

6) "We're pretty screwed up, aren't we?" (Steffan, p.68) Do you agree with Steffan?

Do you think all three of them are "screwed up"?



7) "Where does Steffan get his strength from? ...Where does Jared get **his** from? ... And when did the two boys I've grown up with turn into this? Into... **men**, I guess" Limpet wonders (p.239). Do you think Steffan and Jared are strong? If so, where do you think they get their strength from? Do you think they grow up during the course of the novel?

8) "I am a cracked glass. Set me down too hard and I will shatter into a thousand jagged pieces... Am I like those glasses – fractured, useless – or can I be mended?" (Limpet, p.88). Do you think Limpet is like a "cracked glass"? Can she be mended? Discuss the theme of fragility in the novel.

9) "High walls and small windows may keep enemies out, but they'll keep friends out too" (Limpet, p.249). Why do you think people build themselves a "fortress" (p.249) and keep secrets from their closest friends? Why do people hide their "bruises" (Limpet, p.90)?

10) What is the significance of Limpet's encounter with 'Loopy Lewis', her physics teacher? Consider Limpet's realisation that Mr Lewis has a life outside school (p.160). Consider how she feels about his words of condolence (p.162). How is this a pivotal moment in Limpet's grieving process?

11) "If they were gone - just gone – then there wouldn't be all this. I'd be free, wouldn't I? I wouldn't be their kid. I'd just be me" (Jared, p.217).

Do you understand why Jared feels like this? Might he be better off without his parents? Do you think it's fair of him to say this to Limpet?

12) Consider Limpet's musings on Jared's situation: "Maybe what's happened to him is worse than either my situation or Steffan's. Our mother's are dead... But Jared's? ... Jared's mother **haunts** him" (Limpet, p.179 and p.180). What does Limpet mean? How might Jared's situation be worse? Do you agree with her?

13) *"You get angry with friends, don't you? That's kind of the whole point: that you get angry, and they understand why and you move on"* (Limpet, p.111). Select two episodes from the novel that you think epitomise friendship and discuss why you chose them. Consider what you think the "whole point" of friends is.

14) How does the author use landscape and nature to enhance our understanding of the characters? Consider the metaphor of the sea used throughout the novel, for example, on pages 172, 214 and 235.

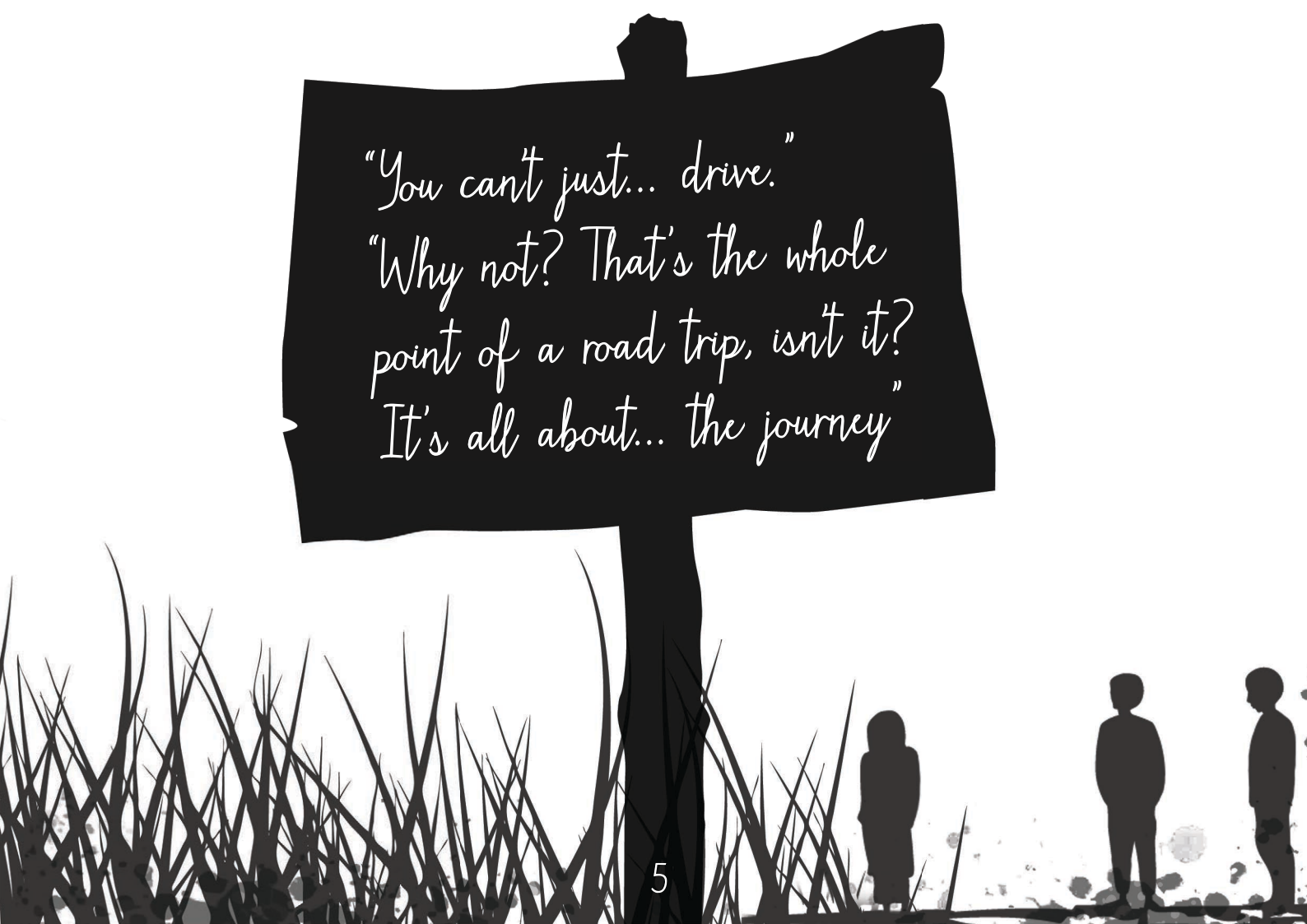
15) *"There's an owl out there somewhere, and I can hear it hooting nearby. Calling to its own kind. It's peaceful. Soothing. At least, it's soothing if you're not a mouse or a shrew or any of the other small furry things that are about to become its dinner"* (p.107). What does this observation reveal about Limpet's character?

16) *"We are all guilty. We are all to blame"* (Limpet, p.135). Discuss the theme of guilt in relation to Limpet and Jared.

17) *"I'm not sure I'll miss the summer; not this one, anyway"* (Limpet, p.94).

Do you think Limpet's view about not missing this summer has changed by the end of their trip?

18) Consider the novel's final lines: *"And my name; my real name...? My name's Rosie. What's yours?"* (Limpet, p.295). Why do you think the author chose to end the novel with these words? What is the significance of Limpet revealing her real name? What effect does Limpet's direct question have on the reader?



*"You can't just... drive."
"Why not? That's the whole
point of a road trip, isn't it?
It's all about... the journey"*

Creative activities

1) Composition and Performance

Write a song or compose a piece of music inspired by *The Last Summer of Us*.

If you choose to write a song, follow the links below to listen to two tracks by 'The Bookshop Band' that were inspired by the novel. You might also like to read the band's song-writing tips at the end of this guide.



www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXMULWMlogU



www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgcBMKgdVfc

If you're more of a wordsmith than a musician, you could pair up with a musician friend and write lyrics to the song. Start by thinking about what you want your song to be about. Perhaps there's a particular sentence or phrase from the novel you could use as the basis for your lyrics. Perhaps you want to explore one particular character's feelings, and write from their point of view. Alternatively, you could explore different characters in different verses. Or, rather than focussing on the characters, you might want to write about some of the novel's themes in a more abstract way.

If you choose to compose a piece of music rather than a song, perhaps you (or a friend) could write lyrics to be read over your composition, and performed as a spoken word piece.

2) Dramatise a scene

In a group, choose a scene from the novel to dramatise and either perform as a play, or film it. Once you've chosen your scene, assign roles to everyone in the group. You'll need scriptwriters and actors, and group members to take responsibility for the set, props and costumes. Someone could also take on the role of musical director and compose a soundtrack to accompany the action.

3) Summer scrapbook

Make a scrapbook about Limpet, Steffan and Jared's "last summer of us". Think about the themes of the novel. Consider the characters' personalities, and how you imagine them to look. Think about the west Wales setting, and what the friends see, do and discover on their trip.

4) Write an epilogue

"Will there be anything more than an echo; the ghosts of the three of us forever running up and down the beach?" (Limpet, p.243).

Consider the excerpt above, and the strapline on the front cover of the book – 'Where do we go from here?' – and think about what might happen to the three characters after the novel ends. Write an epilogue to the novel set ten years later. Are Limpet and Jared still a couple? Is Steffan still in LA? Did Jared ever take his road trip across the USA? Did Limpet's father recover from his alcoholism? What might have happened in those ten years?



The Bookshop Band's Top 5 Tips for writing a song inspired by a book

1) Read the book

The only way to be inspired by a book is to sit down, get comfy, open it up and read it. Bit by bit, or all at once. Enjoy it as a book.

Make notes, don't make notes, as you like. But make sure first and foremost, that you experience the book and the story.

2) Decide what you liked about it

Now that you've finished the book, what do you remember about it? Or what got you thinking about something in your own life? What stories in your own life did the book remind you of? If I asked you to tell me ONE thing about the book NOW, what would you tell me? Even if it seems a really silly small detail, it's stuck in your head for a reason.

3) There is no 'right' song to write

Everyone is different and everyone will have a different opinion about a book, and that is how it should be. When you read a book that is packed with characters, themes, scenes, places, times, lines and emotions you might find that what you like about the book - what resonates with your life perhaps can be very different from the next person. There is SO much in a book, that you never ever know where inspiration is going to come from. Your response is your response, and you response is the most valid thing in the world. Run with it. The song can be about anything, it could even be something that the book got you thinking about that no one else would ever realise was inspired by the book. It doesn't matter. Trust yourself, don't try to be clever, learn how to recognise what it is YOU feel was the most memorable thing about it, and don't follow what other people are doing. The only wrong answer is not to trust what you liked about it.

4) Don't worry if it's going to be a big hit or not

This is not about writing a great song that will be heard by millions. It's about writing a song inspired by a book that may never be played or sung again after it is sung for the first time. This is not sad, it's liberating. You don't have to worry if its good or not, you don't have to worry about it being the best you can do. The most important thing is you just go with the first idea you like, be it musical, lyrical or whatever, and just see where it goes. That way you'll have fun writing the song, and the song you get will be the result of your creativity, and not of you second-guessing yourself all the time.

5) Have a deadline you can't miss

You can spend years on a song, always second guessing if it's good enough, or not knowing even where to start, but it doesn't mean that a song that takes that long is any better or worse than a song that takes 5 minutes. Tell a friend you are going to play them a new song you've written inspired by a book in a couple of hours, then that gives you loads of time to write it. No time to second guess it, no time to procrastinate. A song is only a few minutes long. See if you can write one in just a few minutes.

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