

# READING GROUP GUIDE

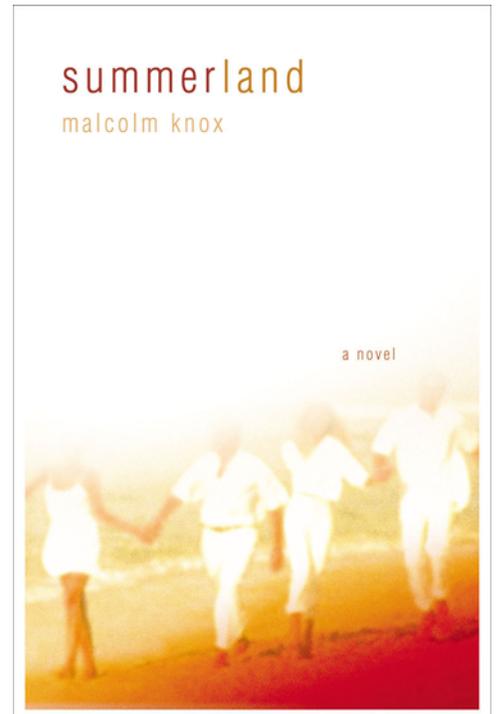
## *Summerland*

*A Novel*

*by Malcolm Knox*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Summerland* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Summerland*.

### About the Book

Like *The Great Gatsby*, to which it was favorably compared by more than one reviewer, *Summerland* is a novel that explores the dreams and deceits, the desires and delusions, of the very wealthy. Malcolm Knox's debut novel concerns the lives of two young couples- four intimately close friends- who grow up, and grow apart, amid the seaside mansions, golf courses, and patio parties of Palm Beach, an Australian resort town, late in the twentieth century. Richard, our narrator, looks over the shores of Sydney Harbor at the outset of the novel, and then spends all night looking back on the halcyon, and later troubled, days and nights he spent with his best friend Hugh, a charismatic heir to power and money beyond compare, and with their respective childhood sweethearts, Pup and Helen. Courtships become marriages, marriages become

liabilities, and the closer Richard looks at his memories, the more his nostalgia turns to nihilism—for the story of Hugh and Helen and Richard and Pup is a suspenseful, masterly told tale of secrets and lies, infatuation and rejection, luxury and self-destruction. In the lost loves, anguished affairs, and dashed hopes of the charming and youthful quartet who animate the pages of *Summerland*, we inevitably confront the romantic disillusion and tragic ruin of society’s richest and most privileged.

## Praise

“Who would have thought it possible to write a contemporary version of Ford Maddox Ford’s classical novel of love and betrayal, *The Good Soldier*? With immense brio Malcolm Knox does just that, and the result, *Summerland*, is a tour de force, a glittering novel full of wit and intelligence and heartbreaking suspense.” —Margot Livesey, author of *Evan Moves the Furniture*

“*Summerland* is a remarkable debut. It’s a love story of an usual sort, the sad tale of an otherwise intelligent man in love with the ruling class. Much like Stevens, the devoted butler in *The Remains of the Day*, Richard has adopted the elite’s values and lost his soul.”—*Newsday*

“[An] astoundingly accomplished first novel... Malcolm Knox’s sentences share F. Scott Fitzgerald’s lush precision... [Knox’s] clear-eyed wisdom and startling, depth-charged prose constitute a novel that should become as much of a classic as the one [Ford Maddox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*] he has remolded.”—*The Guardian*

“*Summerland* [is] very clever. It’s dramatic, a slow exposure of betrayals, hidden passions, guarded egos. It’s thoughtful, examining questions of class and status...A fast-paced, smart, and unsettling story.”—*The Hartford Courant*

“*Summerland* is a compelling novel with a sinister undertow. Malcolm Knox has made an impressive debut.”—*Times Literary Supplement*

## About the Author

**Malcolm Knox** lives in Sydney, Australia, where he has written for the *Sydney Morning Herald* since 1994. His journalism has appeared in Australia, Britain, India, and the West Indies. *Summerland* is his first published novel.

## Discussion Questions

1. Identify the four protagonists of *Summerland*. What did you like and/or dislike about each of them? Which characters were the most interesting or compelling to you, and why? Which were the least so? Point out various descriptions or scenes from the novel in defense of your opinions.
2. The narrator of *Summerland* is himself a lesser player in the tale he is narrating. Why is this the case? Describe the character of Richard— his likes, dislikes, goals, failures, and so

forth. Why is he telling the story of *Summerland* in the first place? And how does he regard the other three main characters in his tale? Were your own impressions of these characters influenced by Richard's feelings for them? Why or why not?

3. About midway through Chapter 1, Richard differentiates between "proximate causes" and "ultimate causes"—the former being a term that is occasionally and digressively employed throughout his account. Explain the distinction Richard makes between these two terms. Why is his narrative primarily concerned with proximate causes?
4. Discuss the importance of this novel's setting. Where does the majority of the action in *Summerland* take place, and why and how does this location matter? Why is the novel called *Summerland* in the first place? What, and where, is the place known as "summerland"?
5. "The people in [this] book, in a sense, grow up very quickly but also don't grow up at all," author Malcolm Knox stated in an interview. Elaborate on this remark. Do you agree with Knox's claim? Explain why or why not, using action or dialogue from the book to support your view.
6. Hugh Bowman, Richard's best friend, is the archetypal Golden Boy, the guy who has everything—looks, wealth, power, and so on. But what exactly—beyond all this material and physical possessions—does Richard see in him? Why does Richard idolize him? Be specific about your answer. And what sort of a friend is Hugh to Richard, both during the beginning chapters and over the whole arc of the novel? Why do they often treat one another so differently?
7. Perhaps even more than money, youth, or love, *Summerland* is thematically centered on the idea of class. Discuss the ways in which Knox's novel addresses the idea of social class. Why is Richard in particular so obsessed with this idea? And how do the other main characters seem to feel about it? Early in Chapter 12, while he is remembering Hugh's deeply disturbed Uncle Bill, Richard admits: "Yet it was only class that saved us." What is Richard saying here— and what is the broader context of his remark?
8. *Summerland* is, essentially, a modern retelling of *The Good Soldier*, the classic novel by Ford Maddox Ford first published in 1915. Reading *Summerland*, we learn that Pup, Richard's wife and an aspiring novelist, is likewise working on a "plagiarized" version of *The Good Soldier*, although Richard himself is unfamiliar with Ford's masterpiece. Explain the ironic relationship between *Summerland* and *The Good Soldier*—both within the story and outside of it—paying particular attention to the final italicized passage of *Summerland*. Also, if you have previously read *The Good Soldier*, compare the ways it affected you emotionally and intellectually to the ways *Summerland* thus affected you.
9. Discuss the ideas of love and fidelity as they appear in the pages of *Summerland*. How does each of the four main characters view these two notions? How do their views differ, if at all, and how are they similar? And why does Helen, Hugh's wife (and later his widow), say to Richard, halfway into Chapter 13: "You were in love with all of us"? What occasions this forthright remark, offered with almost callous hindsight? Is it fair? Or true? And is it a valid excuse for keeping the truth—whatever the truth might be—from Richard?
10. Look again at the Ford Maddox Ford quotation that opens the novel. Explain what it means, and how it relates to the plot and personae of *Summerland*, especially in light of the book's concluding chapter.

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