

Challenging the power of a forgettable old movie to be unforgettable...

In the Absence of Nostalgia for a Summer of '42:



In watching *'The Summer of '42'* (1971) a few nights ago on a DVD borrowed from the library, I was reminded of my reaction upon first seeing it back in the early 1970s. It was billed as a particularly sensitive “coming of age” film.

In my youth, I had zero-identification with movies depicting the rites of passage of American teens. Movies like *'Beach Party'* or *'American Graffiti'* left me cold. The culture of beach frolics, sock hops and foreplay in the back seat of a hot car was about as alien to me as Maasai initiation rituals. Yet for *'Summer of '42'*, I had an exceptional loathing...

The story is a narrator's nostalgic tribute to the mysterious older woman to whom he lost his virginity at the age of fifteen while summering on Nantucket Island. It begins with the depiction of the antics of the narrator and his buddies in pursuit of a trio of girls their own age. In one comic scene, one of them quails before the stern druggist from whom he tries to buy condoms...

Meanwhile, the protagonist is enchanted by the beautiful woman of about twenty-two who rents the neighbouring beach house with her husband, a soldier. After her husband ships off to war, the boy does errands for the young woman, who responds with warmth.

Seeing her porch light burning late one night he works up the courage to visit her. He is unaware that she has just received a telegram that her husband has been killed in combat. In her grief, she hugs him. The hug becomes a slow dance and a tearful embrace. In the schmaltzy strains of the Michel Legrand score, the boy is tugged into the bedroom. The loss of innocence is ‘tastefully’ evoked with the background rustling of curtains and breaking of waves on the beach...

At the time of the movie's popularity, its writer apparently claimed on a talk show that he received letters from more than a dozen women who identified themselves as the mysterious older woman of his autobiographically-based story. Could that many women at one resort in one particular summer remember an affair with a fifteen-year-old boy? As with the Kinsey Report statistics of the era, reported sexual experience—especially so closely aligned with stock adolescent male fantasy—hardly makes for reliable data...

I knew of only one teen acquaintance, who swore he was seduced by a twenty-something nurse. I assumed it exaggeration if not plain fantasy— like the rest of his “cherry-poppin” boasts. It would have been too tormenting to imagine otherwise...



A few months after *'The Summer of '42'*, I also saw for the first time, *'The Last Picture Show'* (1971). Its depiction of 'coming of age' in a Texas town struck me as deeply realistic:

In the film, a shy high school senior (Timothy Bottoms) loses his virginity with the plain and lonely wife (Cloris Leachman) of his football coach. Their nervous coupling is highlighted by clumsy undressing and squeaky bedsprings. In another scene, the teen 'princess' (played by Cybil Shepard) loses her virginity to her mother's sleazy boyfriend on a pool table. The harshness of that movie was as appealing to me as the presumed tenderness of *'Summer of 42'* was repulsive...



A much more recent film, *'The Reader'* (2008), depicts an affair between a 15-year-old German schoolboy and a 36-year-old tram fare-collector in post-war Berlin. Her illiteracy is a darker secret for her than her former role as a Nazi SS prison guard. Even in being unable to imagine myself at fifteen in the situation of the German schoolboy, I thoroughly enjoyed this poignant (and undeniably erotic) film. It has genuine artistic merit.

What seemed, in contrast, most galling about *'Summer of 42'* was its artistic pretensions. I was especially disconcerted when an English professor whose opinions I otherwise respected, mentioned that he found the movie "aesthetically pleasing."

Yet even before seeing the movie for the first time I was put off by the caption on the movie poster in the theatre lobby: *'In everyone's life there is a summer of '42'*. Rather than an invitation to sweet nostalgia for 'loss of innocence', I took that claim as a taunt. Indeed, there was a time in which, like certain male spiders, I would have eagerly had my head bitten off in exchange for first sex. Yet for my summer of turning fifteen— I had not a wisp of nostalgia...

At the same time, I could not deny that the film brought to mind what seemed a defining moment of mid-teens:



In the summer of 1966, my buddies and I would often hitchhike from our village to swim in the Spednic Lake thoroughfare, six miles away. Most often we crossed the border for the sandier beach on the American side, but sometimes we swam from the Canadian shore.

It was one such afternoon near the boat landing on the gravelly Canadian side that we encountered a pair of unfamiliar girls who were also about fifteen. One we vaguely knew was from Connecticut, visiting grandparents in our village. She was cute— but not particularly striking. Her friend (also from Connecticut) was by contrast— tall with a chestnut mane. Beside a dun-feathered local girl— she could have been a flamingo...

We were stunned when that exotic creature with her button-nosed companion walked over to greet us...

The tall girl seemed bold in a manner to which we were not accustomed. She asked teasing questions to my bare-chested buddies. In a few minutes they were joshing together...

I was pale-faced, skin and bones— and already morbidly self-conscious. I stepped back.

Soon my buddies were demonstrating karate chops. The tall girl proceeded to show one of my buddies a half-nelson hold. She then put both hands on his head, about to show him another wrestling move. Suddenly she winced, waved a finger towards me and whispered something to him. Meanwhile, the other girl stole in my direction, a nervous glance.

Both my buddies looked embarrassed. For the first time it occurred that in the company of girls like these—my appearance was becoming a liability...

I needed no further hints. I went to the edge of the boat landing and into the trees. I had always hated taking off my shirt— but that time I would rather have been tortured with fire ants. I left it under a bush and came out of woods out of sight of anyone ...

I waded in and swam to the middle of the thoroughfare. Twisting around to face the boat landing, I treaded water until my teeth chattered. That was long enough for my friends and the two girls to walk away up the hill together...



'*Summer of '42*' seemed no less pretentious a few nights again than it had nearly four decades ago. But this latest (and decidedly last) viewing did not rattle me as it had so goaded the armour of the twenty-one-year-old.

Of course, there will always be a pinch of sadness in recalling that it was not until I had exited the dreadful teens, that I was self-confident enough for anything more than 'platonic' relations with girls. There will always be tweaks of regret for the lengthy periods of self-imposed solitude through my twenties, broken only by fleeting trysts...

Yet that's where the story changes:

In my early-thirties, I would marry a wonderful young woman whose commitment was such that she would join me in departing her African homeland to raise our family together in Canada. The beauty of our daughters would exceed any imagined charms of girls I once thought too far beyond me to even dream about...

So, in the fullness of years, I wonder whether any of the little tarts who taunted my teens have children— or grandchildren—with character or natural beauty equal to that of mine... For anyone without a summer of '42—could greater recompence possibly be desired?

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