

A GUIDE TO

Summer of My German Soldier

Bette Greene

“It’s truly extraordinary,” he said. “Who would believe it? Jewish girl risks all for German soldier.’ Tell me, Patty Bergen . . . why are you doing this for me?”

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Summer of My German Soldier is a historical novel addressing the issues of love, prejudice, and self-worth.

Setting: Early 1940s, during World War II, in Jenkinsville, Arkansas.

Protagonist: Patricia Bergen, a twelve-year-old Jewish girl, who defies the law to give shelter to Anton Reiker, a German prisoner of war.

Conflicts: The main conflict is the international conflict during World War II between the Germans and the Allied forces. Other conflicts include the one between Anton and the Americans of Jenkinsville; Patty’s domestic conflict with her parents; the social conflict between “outcasts” like Anton (the enemy), Patty (a Jew and “Nazi sympathizer”), and Ruth (an African American) and the sociocultural “majority”; Patty’s internal conflict over her own self-worth.

Resolution: Patty’s self-worth conflict is tenuously resolved by Anton’s love, by Ruth’s reassurance, and by Patty’s determination to become a writer; Anton’s death unhappily resolves his conflict with American society; Patty’s and Ruth’s conflicts with society are ongoing, with Patty ending up in reform school. Despite the hardships and tragedies she faces, Patty emerges a strong, determined, mature individual.

Themes: The need for love and the effects of its absence; individuals in conflict with their society; relations between parents and children; relations between people of different races and cultures; the irrationality and destructiveness of prejudice; the growing pains of early adolescence.

Of Special Note: The novel recreates the **atmosphere** of a small Southern town during the early 1940s: its home-front patriotism, the people’s fear and hatred of the enemy, and all the concrete details of the period’s popular culture and everyday life.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The novel should pose no comprehension problems to students reading at the middle school level. Offensive racial slurs are used a number of times to create realism in a particular social context. Patty’s father beats her with his belt several times, but Patty’s strength of character allows her to come to grips with his cruel treatment.

BACKGROUND

World War II and the U.S. Home Front. World War II began in 1939, but the United States didn’t enter it until late 1941, after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The first months of the war, until late 1942, were filled with bad news for America’s allies, which to some extent accounted for the alarmism and violent anti-German sentiment that prevailed throughout the country. Even before the war, the Nazis’ treatment of Jews was widely acknowledged to be unjust, although until 1945 little was known in America of the horrors of the concentration camps.

Prisoners of War (POWs). The novel appears to be set during the second half of World War II, after Americans had begun to fight on European soil and take many German prisoners. Many German soldiers did end up in American POW camps. The Geneva Conventions of 1929 stipulated that POWs be required to give their captors no information other than name, rank, and serial number and that they be sent back home after the war.

**MAIN CHARACTERS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)**

Patricia (Patty) Bergen, a headstrong, impulsive, generous twelve-year-old girl, the oldest daughter of the only Jewish family in a small Arkansas town, desperately seeking the love of her coldhearted parents.

Ruth Hughes, a warmhearted, middle-aged African American who works for Patty’s parents and shows Patty more love than her parents do.

Sharon Bergen, Patty’s well-behaved, pretty five-year-old sister.

Harry Bergen, Patty's father, a store owner, a harsh man who often beats Patty.

Pearl Bergen, Patty's mother, a beautiful but cold woman who berates Patty.

Grandpa Fried (Sam), Patty's grandfather, head of a real-estate business in Memphis and a gentle, outspoken man.

Grandma Fried, Patty's grandmother, a warm woman who tries to compensate for Patty's mother's coldness.

Anton Reiker, a private in the German army, brought to Arkansas as a prisoner of war, who escapes from prison camp and is sheltered by Patty.

Charlene Madlee, a journalist who writes for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and befriends Patty.

PLOT

Chapter 1. We meet the novel's central **character** and her **setting**. The protagonist-**narrator**, Patty Bergen, describes the arrival one summer day of a group of German prisoners of war in her small Arkansas town. The event has attracted a large crowd of townspeople. After the prisoners are driven to a local prison camp, Patty goes home to tell the news to her family's housekeeper, Ruth. Ruth's affection for Patty establishes her as a **foil**, whose behavior contrasts with that of Patty's unloving parents. Patty then heads to her father's department store to tell her parents about the prisoners' arrival. However, her mother is more concerned about making a hair appointment, and her father wants to read the newspaper, actions that hint at one of the novel's major **conflicts**: Patty's unsuccessful quest for her parents' love and approval.

Chapter 2. Patty describes her family's visit to her grandparents in Memphis, which intensifies the **conflict** within the family. Grandpa Fried runs a family real-estate business, and Patty's father has always resented his in-laws' success. Patty's parents favor their younger child, Sharon, who, unlike Patty, is docile and conventionally pretty. Mr. and Mrs. Fried serve as **foils** to her unloving parents; the grandparents love Patty and admire her writing, and Patty feels as if their home is her true home.

Chapter 3. This chapter introduces the plot's central **conflict** and the title **character**. While working at her father's store, Patty sees some German prisoners enter with a guard; they have been working in the blazing sun and need to buy straw hats. One prisoner, Frederick Anton Reiker, translates for the rest, speaking excellent English. Showing remarkable courtesy and gentle humor, he tells Patty about his family in Germany as she sells him a pencil sharpener and a gaudy rhinestone pin.

Chapter 4. Attracted to Reiker, Patty is bursting to talk, and so, in one of the plot's **complications**, she tries to strike up a conversation with Sister Parker, who works in the store. But the woman has a brother in the Army and does not want to hear about nice German

soldiers. Patty, desperate, lies and claims that Anton denounced Hitler to her.

Chapter 5. An excursion with her grandmother gives Patty one beautiful day in her "hot, dry, and endless" summer. Desperately bored because all the girls she knows have gone to Bible camp, she works on her "hide-out," a shed that she has fixed up above the garage, and tries to assuage Ruth's anxiety over her son in the army. Later she pitches pebbles at the hubcaps of passing cars with Freddy Dowd, a poor boy whom her father has forbidden her to see. When a pebble accidentally breaks a car's window, her furious father rushes home and whips Patty brutally with his belt. The severity of the family **conflict** deepens.

Chapter 6. Another **complication** is added to the plot as the town buzzes with rumors about Nazi spies and saboteurs. When Patty tries to tell her parents about the rumors, her mother, primarily concerned with outward appearances, ignores her and forces her to go to the hairdresser for a permanent. Threatened with a beating by her father if she does not go, Patty grimly submits to the hairdresser's humiliating chatter and "frizzly" handiwork.

Chapter 7. The novel's central **conflict** is fully established in this chapter. From her hide-out Patty spies a familiar figure by the railroad tracks. She realizes that it is Anton Reiker, the German prisoner, about to jump onto a moving train. Fearing that he will be killed, Patty runs to him and grabs his hand to keep him from trying to jump aboard the train. At dinner her parents' petty conflict makes her nauseated. Late that night, she goes to the kitchen to pack some food for the prisoner but is stopped by her father's voice.

Chapter 8. At breakfast the next day Patty reads about captured Nazi saboteurs; she is frightened by the warning that anyone caught spying during wartime will be executed. Troubled by an **internal conflict**, she wonders whether "hiding a Nazi" makes her a traitor but packs some food for Anton anyway, not certain if he is in her hide-out. However, she finds him, and Anton's **character** is developed as he describes his family: his grandfather, the president of a university; his historian father, who disliked Hitler but acquiesced in Nazi authority in the end; and his warm, capable mother. Anton reveals that he escaped by bribing a guard with the gaudy pin he had bought from Patty at the store. He asks why Patty is helping him and is stunned to learn that she is Jewish, one of the novel's **ironies**.

Chapter 9. The town is now buzzing with news about Anton's escape. FBI agents question Patty's father about the prisoners who had been in his store. When Sister Parker mentions Patty's chat with Anton, the agents suspiciously question Patty, who tells them half-truths and then bursts into tears. After her father makes them shorten the interrogation, Patty follows Charlene Madlee, a reporter from a Memphis paper, as she conducts her own investigation. Charlene interviews several

officers at the prison camp. One doctor who treated Anton surmises that he is not a Nazi, a saboteur, or a spy. When Patty remembers how the doctor called Anton “a decent man,” her **internal conflict** over helping Anton begins to be resolved.

Chapter 10. Patty gives Anton an expensive shirt she had bought as a Father’s Day gift the year before; the shirt is a **symbol** of her problems with her parents. Her mother had belittled Patty’s desire to buy something costly, and her father had barely noticed the monogrammed shirt with pearl buttons. Anton does appreciate the shirt, and Patty tells him about the FBI interrogation. She fantasizes about running away with Anton. Later Freddy Dowd comes by. When her father comes home and sees Freddy and Patty together, he starts to beat her. Anton sees the beating and rushes from the hide-out, horrified. Patty yells at him to go away, and Anton slips back into the hide-out, unseen by her father.

Chapter 11. The plot develops another **complication** as Ruth reveals that she saw Anton when he rushed from the hide-out. Patty confides her feelings for Anton to Ruth, who recognizes Anton’s heroism in risking his safety for Patty. Later Patty discusses her father with Anton. He tells Patty that she is intelligent and pretty. Ruth startles Anton by calling them *both* to the house to eat, but Patty allays his fears by explaining how Ruth had witnessed his attempt to intervene in the beating.

Chapter 12. Patty introduces Ruth and Anton in the Bergens’ kitchen. The **characters** gain new depth as they discuss the darker side of human nature. Patty is disturbed at Anton’s apparent lack of belief in anything, but Anton tells her that he believes in love, one of the novel’s central **themes**. When they are startled briefly by the arrival of a neighbor outside, one **conflict** comes to a head as Anton realizes the risk he exposes his friends to. To Patty’s dismay, he decides to leave.

Chapter 13. Anton plans to escape that night, and Patty is determined to go with him. She tries to say goodbye to Ruth without revealing her plans. After her parents go to bed, she begs Anton to take her with him, but he refuses. He tells her that he loves her and values her friendship and then gives her his “most valued possession” as a **symbol** of their relationship: the ring his great-grandfather had been given as president of the university. Then he kisses her on the lips and leaves.

Chapter 14. Patty drifts through the next few months without Anton. Treasuring his ring, she finally shows it to Sister Parker, hastily concocting a story about feeding a poor man. When Sister shows Mr. Bergen the ring, her father questions Patty, strikes her and accuses her of letting the “poor man” touch her.

Chapter 15. Bergen telephones the sheriff, who questions Patty calmly and thoroughly and tells her father that he is satisfied with Patty’s story.

Chapter 16. As winter approaches, Patty reviews the past year for gains and losses. She has lost Anton but

has gained grudging new respect from her father. She imagines herself going to Germany at eighteen and finding Anton. The novel reaches its **climax**: One day Patty’s father arrives home, accompanied by two FBI men, one of whom, Mr. Pierce, had questioned Patty earlier about Anton. After pressing her to tell him about the man who gave her the ring, Pierce shows Patty a photograph of Anton and then the Father’s Day shirt, now disfigured with a purple hole. Accusing Patty of having given the shirt to the prisoner, Pierce goads her into screaming Anton’s name. Pierce then reports that Anton has been shot to death trying to avoid arrest. Patty attacks Pierce, calling him a murderer.

Chapter 17. Patty is to be taken to Memphis for questioning. As her father demands that she tell him why she helped Anton, Ruth rushes to her defense. After accusing Ruth of having encouraged Patty’s “meanness,” Bergen fires Ruth and insults her.

Chapter 18. Patty leaves with the FBI men as neighbors scream insults at her. During her interrogation Patty stays with her grandparents in Memphis. Journalist Charlene Madlee visits one night to reassure Patty and her grandparents that she will probably not be charged with treason, although she will probably have to go to reform school.

Chapter 19. It is now Christmastime and Patty is driven to the Arkansas Reformatory for Girls.

Chapter 20. A month later in the reformatory, Patty imagines eventually going to Germany to meet Anton’s mother. The school matron announces that Ruth has come to visit. Ruth gives Patty Anton’s ring, which Patty had thought lost. Helping to **resolve** Patty’s **conflict** with her parents and her **internal conflict** over her worth, Ruth says that she has loved Patty the best of all the children she has cared for and that Patty’s parents “ain’t the number one best quality folks.” Patty accepts that she is not a bad person.

Chapter 21. Ruth’s visit continues. Patty talks about becoming a writer one day; she has been working on an article about the reformatory for Charlene Madlee’s paper. The matron calls for the visit to end, and when Ruth begs for a little more time, she insults Patty and Ruth. Ruth staunchly stands up to matron. Ruth tells Patty that she thinks better times are coming for her. When Ruth leaves, Patty, feeling shipwrecked, hopes that she will be able to make it to “shore” on her own.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

The outstanding element of this novel is its portrayal of painful family relations. Discussion groups or individual projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Exploring the Psychology of the Characters

Many young readers will probably be particularly affected by Patty’s painful relationships with her cold, critical mother and brutal, angry father. Encourage students to use the following activities to

explore the Bergens' conflicts and to investigate alternative resolutions to these conflicts:

- Role-playing to express the feelings of Pearl, Harry, and Patty Bergen to a family counselor, who makes recommendations to ease the family's problems
- Outlining the future course of Patty's life after reform school to indicate how she resolves her problems of self-worth and parental approval

2. Evaluating Credibility and Relevance

Discussion groups might focus on other specific elements of the novel:

- How much do they accept the narrator's view of things? Is she a likeable character? Why or why not?
- How realistic are the other characters in the novel—both the positive and the negative ones? How believable are their problems and actions?
- Which of the novel's themes are broad enough to go beyond its wartime setting? Which theme do students think is most important?

3. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend the ideas in the novel:

- Imagine Patty as a young American girl today. What situation might be comparable to the wartime one she faces in the novel?
- The novel is set more than fifty years ago. Are relations between people of different cultures and races better or worse today than they are in the novel? Explain.
- If Patty were on trial today for helping someone considered an enemy or criminal, how might her actions be judged?

MEET THE WRITER

Bette Greene (1934–) comes from a background similar to that of her heroine Patty Bergen. Born Bette Evensky, she grew up in a Jewish family in Arkansas and Memphis during World War II, later becoming a journalist and writing (as Charlene Madlee does in the novel) for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Published in 1974, *Summer of My German Soldier* is Greene's first novel. Her other works include *Morning Is a Long Time*

Coming, a 1978 sequel to *Summer of My German Soldier*; *Them That Glitter and Them That Don't* (1983), and a series of "Philip Hall" books: *Philip Hall Likes Me, I Reckon Maybe* (1976); *Get Out of Here, Philip Hall* (1982); and *I've Already Forgotten Your Name, Philip Hall!* (1983). Regarding her own Southern girlhood, Greene's friends thought she was the most fortunate girl in town because her parents owned and ran a country store. However, Greene felt like an outsider because of her religion. Not only did her beliefs cause her to feel alienated from her friends and her community, but they also made her feel uncomfortable with herself.

READ ON

Bette Greene, *Morning Is a Long Time Coming*. A sequel to *Summer of My German Soldier*. Patty, now 18, leaves her parents and goes to Paris, where she becomes romantically involved with a young Frenchman; she also tries to make contact with Anton's mother.

Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*. Novel and later a play. An intense, hyperimaginative Southern girl fights isolation and craves acceptance.

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In this novel, a young girl in a Southern town is caught up in her father's defense of an innocent black man.

Jean Fritz, *Homesick*. An autobiography about the author's childhood in Hankow, China. As a child the author, an American, felt out of place in both the British school she attended and the Chinese community where she lived.

Francis Goodrich and Albert Hackett, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. A play based on the true-life journal of a Jewish girl who describes her years of hiding from the Nazis in an attic room in Amsterdam.

Anne McCaffrey, "The Smallest Dragonboy." In this short story from one of a series of fantasy novels about the dragons of Pern, young Keevan must work harder than any other boy his age to prove himself.

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