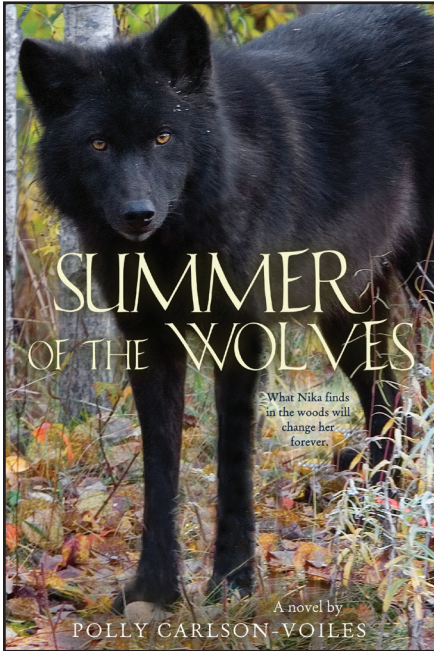


SUMMER OF THE WOLVES *by* POLLY CARLSON VOILES

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About the Book

Julie of the Wolves meets *Hatchet* in this middle grade novel that follows twelve-year-old Nika and her seven-year-old brother, Randall, as they leave their California foster home to spend a summer with their long-lost uncle. Together with her uncle, a wildlife biologist who studies and monitors wolves, Nika finds an orphaned wolf pup in a cave. With vivid details about caring for a wolf pup and a deep sense of our interconnectedness with nature, this compelling first novel explores themes of searching for family and finding a balance between caring for—and leaving alone—wild animals.

Author Biography

Polly Carlson-Voiles says this novel, her first, grew out of several things: her longtime love of the wilderness country in northern Minnesota, her experiences with wolves at the International Wolf Center in Ely, Minnesota, and her career of working with lost and found children as a secondary special ed/English teacher in inner city Minneapolis. She lives with her husband and dog near Ely, Minnesota, high on a ridge across the lake from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, where on lucky nights they listen to the music of the wolves.

Discussion questions

1. Read the Rumi quotation at the beginning of the book. Why did the author choose this quote, and what is she trying to convey to the reader?
2. From the beginning, we feel that Nika does not want changes to happen in her life. What are her reasons for this?
3. Find passages in the book that talk about the development of senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting) in Khan and other wolf pups. Which sense seemed to develop first, and why would this be? Which two senses seem to be the most important for young wolves? Is this different from what you know about the development of humans? Discuss senses and what they do for us. (To go further with this question, look on the Internet about human development and wolf pup development.)
4. Bristo casts a cloud over Nika at the beginning of the book. Does the book represent him as an evil character, or in some other way? Give your own idea about what might motivate Bristo, and talk about how his behavior affects other characters in the book. What do you think happens to Bristo past the ending of this book? How does a person learn to deal with the “Bristos” in his or her life?
5. Name several times in the book when Nika breaks rules, and tell how she justifies this. Then tell what you think she could have done to be more forthright and avoid breaking rules. What would you have done in these situations, and why? Are there things she could have done instead while still standing up for herself and what she thought and wanted?
6. The Luna story runs through the book, separate at first, then coming together with Nika’s story. How are their two stories similar? What do Luna and Nika have in common as far as what they need and how they have struggled?
7. How does Nika’s self-image change over the period of the book? Does she grow stronger or more vulnerable, or both? Talk about incidents in the book that tell how she sees herself and how this changes.

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8. What does Nika get out of being in the woods? How does this change her? Name one scene in the book where she feels changed by experiencing something directly in nature.
9. Do other people cause Nika to change during this story, or is change her own choice? Give examples.
10. Name one scene in which Thomas shows that he is a supportive friend to Nika. What do we learn from Thomas about empathy? Does Thomas always agree with Nika? Do good friends sometimes disagree with each other?
11. Pearl seems to realize that Nika has to work out her relationship with Ian on her own. Give examples of how she offers Nika support but not direction. Do you get the feeling that Pearl knows she is doing this?
12. What do you think about Nika's feelings about burying the dead wolf? How are her feelings different from Ian's? Is there more to Nika's reaction than her appreciation of a beautiful animal?
13. When Nika chooses to leave Randall at the end—after all of the time when it had been just the two of them—do you think this was a selfish decision or unselfish decision? How would she justify this decision?
14. Think about the word *compassion*, which means showing concern for the feelings and suffering of others. How does Nika show compassion in this story? Name several acts of compassion by any character in the story.
15. How does one decide what is ethical in the treatment of wild animals? Human views vary widely about this subject. Name four characters that represent differing attitudes about the treatment of wolves. Talk about what each one believes. What do you believe?
16. What attitudes about nature and wild animals are reflected in the following events?
 - Luna is kept alone in a pen as a pet.
 - Luna's owner decides to give her to the center.
 - Bristo keeps wild animals in pens even though he does not have permits to do so.
 - Bristo shoots Luna.
 - Thomas and Nika decide to feed Luna secretly.
- Nika runs with Khan on the Big Island.
- A man insults Nika in the newspaper office, calling her uncle a "bleeding heart."
- Ian and Elinor study wild animals and teach others about them.
- Animals are kept captive at the CSNA.
- From the plane Nika and Elinor watch the wild wolves running.
17. What is Meg's role throughout the book, even when she is an absent character? What does she say in a letter to get Nika back on track again? What does she teach her about love?
18. In spite of the pain of Nika's losses, what does she do that allows her to accept love and family in the end?
19. What is it about the girl on the bus that causes Nika to tell her, "You saved my life." Describe what she learns about herself from this girl.
20. Does Nika keep secrets? Would it have changed her experience if she had shared truths at these times? Why didn't she?
21. In reading the epilogue, what do we learn about what happens in Nika's life from the point of view of the wolf Luna?

Writing Prompts

1. In a small group, write down these terms and a description of each on separate snips of paper: *compassion, loyalty, overcoming challenges, bravery, determination, sacrifice, identity*. Shuffle and have each student draw one. Each student will write a brief description of ways the concept he or she drew relates to *Summer of the Wolves*. After writing, the group will take turns sharing with one another, allowing other group members to add to each student's ideas.
2. Think of a memory of when you experienced something in nature for the first time—touched a snake, learned the name of a variety of tree, were scared by a storm or wind. Talk about this memory and how you value it: describe it using as many senses as you can—sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste. Conclude with what it means to you and what you learned.

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- Did this experience help create your attitude about natural things or places?
- Imagine you are Nika walking into the forest alone for the first time on Big Berry Island. Write a paragraph in first person as you imagine you might have felt in her shoes.
 - Write a one-paragraph promotional ad for the story that doesn't give away the ending.
 - Do a report about the history of wolves in North America, including where they live and what laws exist currently protecting them.
 - Write a paragraph using one of the following statements as the first line, using examples to explain ways that Nika learns to understand this idea.
 - You don't have to own something to love it.
 - How can you love something if you lose it?
 - Sometimes love is letting go.
 - Think of another book in which an island is used as a setting for a place to grow and learn. Write a description of an island where you would like to go. What would you hope to learn from your island?
 - Do a growth chart for wolf pup growth rates over a year. Make a second line for typical growth rates for a human over a year. Why do you think some animals evolved to grow to adulthood so fast?
 - Is there a way that Nika keeps secrets from herself? In other words, she knows what might happen but shuts off this information from herself. Have you ever known how something was going to work out but didn't want to accept it? Write about what Nika keeps from herself and compare it to an experience in your own life.
 - Wolves that strike out on their own to leave their packs are called dispersers. Find an Internet link that describes *dispersers* as the term is used in wolf study. Write about what you learned. Write about how this role relates to Nika—her decisions, her change of mind.
 - Did Nika's wilderness encounters break her heart or make it whole again?
 - Write what you think happens next to Nika in her life's journey. Choose a certain period of time in her story and write your guesses.
 - Right after she returns to Red Pine.
 - The next school year.
 - The next five years.
 - After high school.
 - When Nika talks about the "the clone girls," what does she mean? Write your thoughts about how either joining or not joining a group like "the clone girls" changes the way a person feels about themselves.
 - Pretend you are Nika and write a goodbye letter to Ian, Randall, Pearl, or Thomas.
 - Think about why Nika's feelings about Khan are so important in her life story. Consider what has happened to her before—how she has handled her losses, then found Khan and literally held him close to her, under her shirt. How does the finding and the losing of Khan affect Nika's sense of herself? Would her visit to her uncle have ended the same way if she hadn't found Khan? Write about how Khan changes Nika.
 - Make a chart to show changes for characters in the story. Down the side list three or more characters. Across make a column for each of the following:
 - Before the story begins
 - At the beginning
 - Problems in the middle that cause change
 - At the end of the story