

My Summer (and the **Song** of Cicadas)

By Marsh Myers

Book 3 in the
Quinton's Curious Mind Series



Laughing Boy Fiction
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*For Chris Sands, who always finds a way.
With love.*



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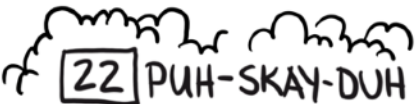
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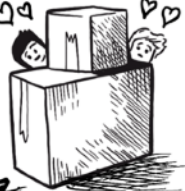


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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

I started writing *My Summer (and the Song of Cicadas)* in the shadow of my mother's death. It's a book I very much hoped she would live to read, as this series was, in many ways, inspired by her and the childhood she gave me.

While this series is purely a work of fiction, my family, like Quinton Wyatt's, was headed by a single mother living in the suburbs of Tucson, Arizona, during the 1970s and 80s. My father was mostly out of the picture, so when it came to handling all the day-to-day issues of being a parent, that fell entirely on my mother's shoulders. Yet she never complained. Instead, Mom embraced her new reality, sometimes joyfully, sometimes defiantly. She put herself through graduate school, obtained a Master's Degree, and spent the rest of her professional life as an elementary school librarian.

It was Mom's love of stories — and storytelling — that contributed to me becoming a writer. She read stories to us every night, encouraged us to write our own, or even act them out in the backyard using improvised costumes and homemade cardboard props. When finances allowed it, she took us to movies, plays, musicals, concerts and — much to my chagrin — operas. She encouraged us to read about myth and legend, and experience stories from different genres, cultures, and eras. No reading material was considered bad, and comic books were respected as much as classic literature.

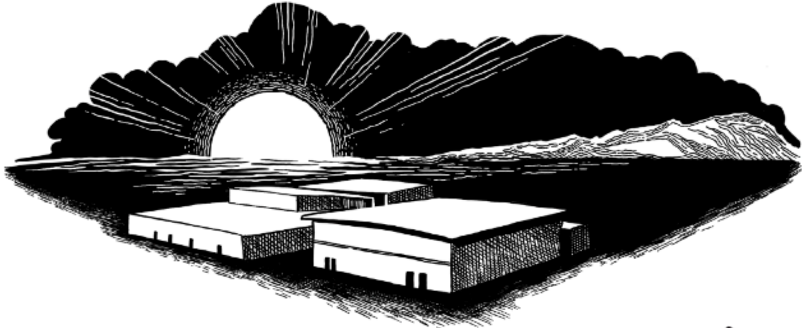
Mom was eighty years old when I published my first book. Yet she still read everything I wrote, offering her editorial notes and unique insights as someone who understood juvenile and young adult literature due to two decades of working with it extensively. Not only was she a valued editor, she was an inspiration.

With this book, the *Quinton's Curious Mind* trilogy, which began in 2018 with *My Summer (with Robots)* and continued in 2021 with *My Summer (Under a Crescent Moon)*, comes to a close. It's a bittersweet milestone, as writing these novels has been a very personal experience. And none of it would have been possible without my mother.

I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Brooke Myers, Ruth A. Musgrave and Karen McGarrity for their support and advice throughout the creation of this series.

-Marsh Myers

August 2024



1: A SUNSET GRADUATION

Rumor has it that our high school principal, Miss Fortescue, is a lesbian.

Most of these stories come from her being unmarried and childless in her mid-fifties.

And that she dresses like a frumpy English nanny.

And that she has a typically masculine haircut with a perfect part on the left side.

And that her favorite pastime is bowhunting.

Anytime a student's mad at Miss Fortescue, her ambiguous sexuality becomes an easy way to cut her down, because if I've learned anything in my four years in high school, there's no higher insult among teenagers than to be called "gay." Nothing about her — other than being the school's ultimate authority— makes Miss Fortescue deserving of any mean-spirited rumor. I've always found her to be very professional and patient. From time to time, she's even exhibited a wry sense of humor that makes me believe she's not nearly as severe as her outward demeanor and tweed skirts would suggest. But rumors thrive better when there are no facts to contradict them. Sitting in the crowd at my graduation, just an anonymous body in a sea of green and gold

gowns and mortar boards, I realize that the gay rumors about Miss Fortescue have made me feel a kinship with her.

This epiphany hits me just as she returns to the podium, readjusts the microphone so it's appropriate for her extraordinary six-foot-two-inch height, and thanks the district superintendent for his completely forgettable comments about the importance of a high school diploma. I hold my breath as she introduces the next speaker because I know what's coming will suck, and it pains me to see Miss Fortescue made a fool one last time.

"Now, students, parents, and guests, please welcome our Senior Class Valedictorian, Mr. Samuel Dexter Howell," she says proudly.

Sam takes his time wading through our senior class, assembled in neat rows on the football field and bathed in the cold glare of the massive overhead lights. Because my friend has the highest grade point average in the school, he was automatically offered the chance to give one of the commencement speeches. However, none of us thought he would accept as he openly disdains any school ritual. But then, out of the blue, he announced he was doing it but wouldn't tell any of us about the content of his address. As he begins to speak, I understand why. Sam's delivering the most scathingly satirical graduation speech ever written, a three-page masterpiece of cringing flattery and false sentimentality. Because our school mascot is the golden eagle, his speech is also peppered with over-the-top bird imagery and even includes a poem:

*"I am a fuzzy fledging, a fact that's plain to see,
But remember that the mighty eagle,
was once a chick like me."*

Due to the proximity of our last names, Hamilton's seated a row in front of me and two chairs to the left. He looks at me and mouths the words, "Holy shit!" before laughing into his hands. I smile

brightly and give him a double thumbs-up, even though I disapprove of Sam's actions. Sam concludes the speech with the following:

“Whether today marks the beginning of your college career, or, like so many of you, the beginning of your careers in the pool maintenance or the exotic dance industries, now's the time to groom your feathers, stretch your wings, and soar... soar... SOAR!”

At this point, Sam pulls his arms partially inside his graduation robe and begins flapping them like wings. Then, walking in the halting, head-bobbing manner of a chicken, he clucks his way offstage and retakes his seat among the student body. Although I knew Sam could have moments of dramatic flair — usually expressed during late-night role-playing games — who knew he was capable of this kind of theatrics in front of hundreds of people?

Applause is slow to begin and quick to end, as the audience isn't sure how to respond. Miss Fortescue's clearly displeased, but she can do nothing except move quickly to dispensing diplomas. As much as I feel for our principal, it was her fault to assume Sam's speech would be appropriate because he was at the top of the class. She made the same mistake about Sam that everyone makes about her — judging him by some outward quality without knowing anything about him.

After the ceremony, all of my friends are heaping praise on Sam. Even his parents and sister laugh because, unlike Miss Fortescue, they know who he is and are probably relieved that his speech didn't include any profanity.

“So, Quinton, you're the writer,” he grins, his big round face flushed with excitement and his hooked nose glistening with perspiration. “What did you think of my opus on our high school careers?”

I bite my lower lip. “I'm not sure if it counts as writing. Maybe more like performance art?” I reply.

“Years from now, it’s the only thing people will remember about tonight,” Caspian beams, because of our group, Caspian fancies himself the most rebellious and, therefore, is a fan of anything impertinent.

“I’d agree with that,” I say.

From the crowd, I hear Andy’s voice. “I’m free at last, but they won’t let me leave. Help! Help!” When he emerges, he’s dragging his two younger sisters and a girl cousin behind him as they’ve latched onto his arms and waist like Remoras stuck to a shark. The girls have dreaded Andy’s graduation for months because the end of high school means the beginning of college, which means they won’t see him much anymore. He shakes himself gently loose from their grips and begins distributing hugs. When he reaches me, he buries his face in my shoulder and whispers, “Thank god this is over.”

“High school or graduation?” I ask.

“Both,” he laughs.

We keep our arms around each other as we join Sam, Caspian, and Hamilton for the requisite group photos. Then my mom reminds us that we still have a graduation party to attend so everyone begins filing out to the parking lot.

“Hey, Mom, can I borrow the camera for a few minutes?” I ask. “I want to take some quick pictures of the school before the sun goes down completely.”

She hands me her Instamatic without question. She understands that tonight’s transformational, quite literally, the end of my childhood, so she has a purse full of extra film and flash bulbs so she and I can document it thoroughly.

“I’ll meet you guys at the car,” I call as I hurry toward the main buildings.

The school groundskeepers have been obsessively watering the athletic fields to get the grass nice and green for tonight’s event. Unfortunately, they failed to adjust the timers on the automatic

sprinklers so when the graduates and their families showed up, the lawns were saturated and slippery. Walking across them in dress shoes is a precarious thing, and by the time I reach the school's central courtyard, the cuffs of my slacks and the hem of my gown are damp and discolored. But at least I don't fall on my ass.

The courtyard's surprisingly beautiful right now. Or, more to the point, my sentimentality is making it seem that way since it's ordinarily anything but. The first time I stood here, I was scared to death of this place, half-convinced by my sister Kenna that I would be hunted like a wild animal by packs of upperclassmen. But that never happened. My high school career turned out to be a pretty wonderful time, and now that I'm standing among the concrete planters with the palm trees rustling in the summer breeze above the faint drone of cicadas, I'm already missing this place.

I climb the steps to the courtyard's highest terrace and, with my back to the cafeteria and bookstore, snap several photos looking west. The school's main buildings cut dark shapes into a sunset the colors of a blood orange.

"I thought I saw you sneaking away," someone bellows from the twilight shadows to my left. A dim figure, dressed in the same dark green robe and mortar board as myself, takes the steps two at a time. Halfway up, the mortarboard slips from his head to reveal short blond hair.

"Hey, Teej," I laugh. "What's with the hair?"

"Blame it on my mom," T.J. blushes. "She said she didn't want her son looking like a ragamuffin for his graduation day."

"What the fuck's a ragamuffin?" I ask.

"I have no idea, but apparently, this gnarly haircut keeps me from looking like one." He runs his fingers lightly up the side of his sheared head. "It doesn't look too fucked up, does it?"

I shrug. "Nah. But I always thought you looked better with longer hair."

There's a ticklish pause where we look at our feet like preschoolers deciding whether to play in the sandbox together. I'm suddenly worried that complimenting my ex's hair, even in such a mild way, might be sending the wrong message. We've spent the last two years feigning indifference toward each other. I don't want to ruin my part of that by revealing that I still have opinions on how handsome T.J. is — even though I definitely do.

Finally, T.J. says: "That was quite the commencement speech your friend gave."

"Sam? Yeah, I wish I could say that was surprising, but we kinda figured he was up to something because that speech was top secret. I don't think Miss Fortescue was thrilled."

"Heh, who cares what that old dyke thinks, right?"

I wrinkle my nose at this. "I guess."

"Hey, I never heard what your plans were after graduation. I assume you're going to the university?"

"I am, but out of state."

His eyes widen. "Out of state? Really? That has to be expensive."

"I got a scholarship and some grant money to go. I'm going with Sam and Andy."

"Oh! Did they get scholarships, too?"

"Well, different ones from me, but yes. We're gonna be roommates."

"That's awesome," he enthuses, and his happiness seems genuine.

"What about you?" I ask.

He shrugs, turning to look at the sunset so the warm light paints the bridge of his perfect nose and high cheekbones a rosy red. "Don't really know yet," he says somewhat wistfully. "I'll find a job doing something somewhere if I can figure out what I'm good at."

"You're good at lots of things," I snort.

“No, Quint, *you’re good at lots of things*. I don’t know what I am.” He looks back at me, his smile refreshed, and playfully tosses and catches his mortarboard. “But I’ll figure it out.”

“I know you will,” I smile.

He takes a deep breath and adds, “Well, I’ll let you go. I’m sure you got parties to go to or something...”

“Yeah, our families rented a restaurant, so we’re doing it all together. How about you?”

“Dinner with the family first, then I’m going to some parties later in the evening.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Should be.”

“Well, good luck with everything, Teej.”

“You too, Quint.”

We nod to each other, and I cross to the stairs and head toward the school’s main parking lot.

“Hey, Quint!” T.J. calls from the terrace.

“Yeah?”

“Would you take a picture of us together and send it to me? If you don’t mind?”

I glance down at the Instamatic camera in my hands. There are precisely two shots left on the film roll. “Sure,” I answer, hurrying back up to him.

We stand together on a concrete bench so the sunlight can catch most of us before it completely recedes behind the buildings. “Here, I’ll hold the camera on the right side, you hold it on the left side, and you’ll have to push the button to take the photo. The flash is on, so try not to blink,” I tell him.

“Got it,” he says, positioning his left hand on the camera and looping his right arm around my shoulders. This takes me by surprise. T.J. Shapleigh hasn’t touched me in two years, let alone in such a

friendly manner. But I reciprocate with my right hand on the camera and my left resting on his shoulder near his neck.

“Okay, two shots left, so make them good. Ready?” I ask.

“Ready.”

“1... 2... 3...”

The shutter releases, and the flashbulb pops. Then we do it again, our heads slightly touching with our arms looped around each other. I notice he smells like Juicy Fruit gum. Like always.

“Okay, I gotta run,” I say.

“Don’t forget,” he calls after me. “One of those photos is mine. Whichever one I look better in.”

“I won’t forget,” I call back.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Marsh Myers is a writer, artist, photographer, educator, bookseller and an unapologetic nerd. He has worked in the fields of animal and child welfare, natural history and environmental conservation — all topics which often appear in his writing. He is currently employed by the Oregon State University.

My Summer (and the Song of Cicadas) marks the completion of the *Quinton's Curious Mind Series*, his first young adult series. His next writing project will be a supernatural mystery series for preteens.

When not writing, Marsh enjoys exploring the doors, travel, movies or wandering the aisles of a comic book store.

To learn more about Marsh and his work at marshmyers.com.

OTHER TITLES BY MARSH MYERS:

