I always hated summertime. When people take off their clothes. In wintertime you can hide yourself... But in the summertime they can see your thick legs and your wobbly backside and your big belly and your soft arms. And they laugh.

—Bobby Marks, age 14, in One Fat Summer

In One Fat Summer, 14-year-old Bobby Marks is doomed to spend the summer with his family at Rumson Lake, a community where many New Yorkers go to escape the heat and the fast-paced life of the city. To overweight Bobby, the lake means swimming. Swimming means taking off your clothes. Taking off your clothes means revealing your fat body to the local Rumson boys so they can call you names like “Crisco Kid.”
Bobby's only plan for the summer is to complete a school project with Joanie, his best friend and supporter. To his surprise, Joanie mysteriously returns to the city, leaving him with nothing to do but to sit around and feel sorry for himself. Mr. Marks tries to help by suggesting that Bobby busy himself by working as a counselor in a day camp or as a mother's helper. Bobby hates his father's suggestions and secretly takes a job as a yard boy for Dr. Kahn. The summer is looking better for Bobby, especially when he realizes that physical labor is causing him to lose weight. Then Willie Rumson, a jobless town bum, decides that he wants Bobby's job. When Bobby refuses to relinquish the job, Willie threatens to gun him down. At this point, Bobby's newly discovered confidence is put to the test. With only a rusty Cub Scout knife in his pocket for defense, Bobby takes on Willie in an underwater fight. Willie, who is not used to losing, is surprised when Bobby, an excellent swimmer, defeats him without ever using the knife.

Bobby Marks is 16 years old and thinner in *Summer Rules*. He is tougher and more self-confident and ready to do “real man’s” work by helping Jim Smith, a local landscape gardener. However, Bobby’s father, a city slicker who considers the locals at Rumson Lake “trash,” has made other plans for him. He thinks being a camp counselor is a more appropriate job for Bobby. Michelle, Bobby’s older sister, is already on the staff of the Happy Valley Day Camp and reluctantly agrees to ask Moe Bell, the camp director, to hire her brother. Bobby’s challenge begins when he takes over the “Atom Smashers,” a group of 10-year-olds with the worst reputation in camp. Harley Bell, Moe Bell’s nephew and the terror of the camp, is in Bobby’s group. Harley is so emotionally disturbed that he consumes all of Bobby’s time, taking Bobby’s attention away from the other campers.

Being a man with an imagination, Bobby devises a plan for Harley. If the plan works, the other campers will be free to enjoy camp, and Bobby will be free to spend more time with Sheila, his summer heartthrob. Things are going well, and everyone is in high spirits until tragedy strikes the camp. The casino goes up in flames, and Bobby is faced with a “real man’s” job of telling the truth and saving Willie Rumson, his old enemy, from being accused of a crime he did not do.

In *The Summerboy*, the last book in the trilogy, Bobby is 18 years old and finally lands a “real man’s” job. Having just completed his freshman year in college, he returns to Rumson Lake for the summer with the idea of working at Lenape Laundry with the tough guys. This time, his parents have less influence on his decision. Mr. and Mrs. Marks have remained in the city for the summer, and his sister is spending the summer in Europe.
Now that he has the house to himself, Bobby feels a surge of independence and boldly approaches Roger Sinclair, the new owner of the laundry, for a job. Mr. Sinclair is doubtful that the local workers will accept a summerboy but he decides to take a risk and tells Bobby, “The job is yours if you can hack it.” Bobby intends to prove that he is more than a soft college boy looking for a summer taste of real man’s work. He is eager to sweat and labor with the locals, but meets head-on with rejection and discovers working conditions that threaten the safety of the laundry employees.

After a week on the job, Bobby learns that Roger Sinclair has no interest in the laundry and even less interest in making things better for his discontented workers. When Sinclair asks Bobby to spy on the volatile employees, Bobby calls it snooping and eventually turns his support to the workers. A series of events causes Bobby to stand up to Sinclair and demand that the employees be heard. Bobby’s notion that hard labor makes a man proves to be partially true. His active involvement in fighting Sinclair on behalf of the workers and helping his friend, Joanie, out of a difficult situation help him discover the true qualities of manhood.

This autobiographical trilogy is appropriately told in first person. Bobby’s constant wisecracks and his skill for making puns make his toughest situations laughable. Lipsyte is a master storyteller with an amazing understanding of adolescence and a special knack for humor. Young adults most often label him “a writer who makes real life seem funny.”

**ONE FAT SUMMER**

**SETTING THE SCENE**

Robert Lipsyte’s three books about Bobby Marks are considered coming-of-age novels. Discuss the term coming-of-age. At what age do most young adults begin their journey to adulthood? List some of the physical and emotional characteristics that identify coming-of-age.

**DISCUSSION**

- The novel begins the summer of Bobby’s fourteenth year. How does Bobby describe himself? Why does he hate summertime?
How does Bobby get the courage to call Dr. Kahn about the lawn job? Why does he choose to keep his summer job a secret from his family? At what point does Bobby discover that his mother knows about his job?

Discuss why Bobby is always making up stories about heroes.

Bobby says that he and Joanie are good pretenders. Do you think Bobby really is a good pretender? Why?

“Rule number one: never let people know they can get to you or they’ll never stop trying.” Find incidents in the novel where Bobby lets people get to him.

Describe Willie Rumson. Why is he so angry? Why is Bobby a victim of Willie’s anger?

Bobby’s father says, “A man has to do something with his life.” What do you think Mr. Marks wants Bobby to do with his life?

What does Joanie mean when she asks Bobby, “Are you a man or a rug?” Find incidents where Bobby is a “rug.” Find incidents where he is a “man.”

Dr. Kahn advertises the lawn job for one dollar per hour, but offers Bobby only 75 cents an hour. Why does Bobby accept the job? Why do you think Dr. Kahn keeps Bobby on if he is so dissatisfied with Bobby’s work? What makes Bobby continue to work when he takes so much verbal abuse from Dr. Kahn?

Michelle says to Bobby, “I guess you will be a writer when you grow up. . . . You’re such a liar already.” Why would Michelle think that lying is a qualification for becoming a writer?

Why do you think Pete jumps Willie when the problem between Bobby and Willie has been solved? Why do Bobby and Michelle hate Pete for his actions? What does Bobby mean when he says that “Pete didn’t know any more about being a man than I did.”

In reference to his summer job, Bobby says, “I probably should have told Mom the truth. She would have helped me convince Dad. But then she would have interfered, driven over to look at Dr. Kahn’s lawn, maybe even talked to Dr. Kahn. I wanted this to be all mine.” Why is it important for Bobby to have a job that is all his? Think about experiences or situations that you have wished to keep secret. Why was this important to you? How may this desire for privacy reflect your need for independence?

When Bobby’s mother doesn’t notice his weight loss, he says, “She didn’t really look at me. Nobody really looks at people in their own house.”
Do you think your family members really look at each other? What things would you like for your family to notice about you? How can you be a better observer?

- *One Fat Summer* has been challenged because it is “sexually explicit and full of violence.” Locate passages in the book that cause challengers to accuse the novel of being violent and sexually explicit. How are these passages necessary to show Bobby’s journey toward becoming a man?

**ACTIVITIES**

- Write a journal entry that Bobby might have written the day he got the job at Dr. Kahn’s. Write another entry that he might have written on the day that he told Dr. Kahn that he underpaid him.
- Pretend that Bobby visits a support group for overweight teens. Prepare and deliver a speech that Bobby might give.
- Design a “split-screen” collage that reveals the changes that occur within Bobby from the beginning of the novel to the end.
- Act out the scene in chapter 19 in which Bobby has the encounter with Willie.
- Bobby is always making up stories about heroes. Write a story making Bobby the hero.

**SUMMER RULES**

**DISCUSSION**

- Why does Bobby’s father want him to work at Happy Valley Day Camp? Why does Bobby think Happy Valley should be called “Pathetic Molehill”?
- “Taking care of spoiled brats was no real man’s job.” How would Bobby describe a “real man’s” job? Why do you think having a “real man’s” job is so important to Bobby?
- Bobby says about Joanie, “I started to miss her. Then I remembered she was dating college men these days.” Why do you think this would make a difference in their relationship?
• Bobby’s father asks, “Aren’t you sorry now you put up such a fuss about going to Happy Valley?” What does Bobby mean when he says, “It was a rhetorical question, no answer required”?

• How do the Rumsons and Smiths view the summer people? How does Bobby’s father view summer renters? Discuss how the renters are different from the people who own summer homes.

• Describe Harley’s behavior. Why does Harley have behavior problems? How does Bobby’s plan for Harley help the other campers?

• “Like all true bullies, he [Harley] picked his victims with care.” What kinds of people do bullies pick? Discuss whether Harley is really a bully.

• When Bobby gets drunk at the counselors’ party and Jim Smith finds him and takes him home, Bobby’s father is angry because he thinks that Bobby has been out with Jim. Discuss why Michelle doesn’t tell her father the truth about where Bobby has been.

• “I was jealous. Joanie and Stewart could talk poetry and make literary jokes with each other. . . . Sheila didn’t know who I was any more than I knew who she was.” Describe Bobby and Sheila’s relationship. At what point does Bobby start losing interest in Sheila? What type of girl is Bobby really looking for?

• Bobby tries to have a discussion with his father about lying, but Mr. Marks tries to get off the subject. Why do you think it is difficult for Mr. Marks to discuss lying?

• Why do you think that Bobby goes to the police and tells them that Willie Rumson didn’t burn the casino?

• Moe Bell says that “winning isn’t everything.” Do you think society puts too much emphasis on winning in sports and other competitions? What are some things that could be more important than winning? Describe something that you would enjoy doing if less emphasis were put on winning.

ACTIVITIES

• In old magazines, find pictures that best resemble the following characters: Bobby, Michelle, Jerry, Moe Bell, Sheila, and Harley. Using the pictures, make a camp memory book. Label each picture with an appropriate quote from the novel.
“Imagination, I thought, where would a writer be without it.” Reread the section of the novel in which Bobby uses his imagination to get Harley to come down from the roof of the casino. Embellishing the story that Bobby tells, write a horror story about a buzzard attack on Harley.

Pretend that you are a radio or television reporter. Tape an on-the-spot news story about the fire at Happy Valley. Include an interview with Moe Bell and Jerry Silver.

Play the music from *The King and I*, and identify Jerry’s song. Write a paper contrasting the lyrics of the song with growing up.

**THE SUMMERBOY**

**DISCUSSION**

- Describe the Lenape Laundry. Why does Bobby want to work at the laundry? What specific job does he want to do? Why do you think Roger Sinclair hires Bobby?
- “I’d cut grass and I’d been a day-camp counselor, and last summer I was a lifeguard at Spiro’s Lakeside, but I had never had a real job before.” Why doesn’t Bobby consider any of his previous jobs “real jobs”?
- Roger Sinclair fires Bobby after the accident with the laundry truck. Why does he then hire him back?
- Discuss why Bobby decides to stay at the laundry after such a hard first week on the job. Why does Jim Smith try to get Bobby to quit?
- Describe Roger Sinclair. What is his attitude toward the laundry? What are his feelings toward the laundry workers? Why is he afraid of Bobby?
- What does Mr. Sinclair mean when he says, “Marks, old chap, you’ve got to learn that the hero walks through the crowd without becoming one of the crowd”?
- Bobby says that he and Joanie “had been friends since they were three years old, and we’d helped each other through plenty of rough times.” What are some of the rough times that Bobby and Joanie have shared?
- When Bobby quit the laundry after the first week on the job, he says, “I left behind a few people whose respect I would have liked to earn.” Who do you think those people are? Why?
• “She [Joanie’s mother] never asked me a direct question. She’s afraid I might tell her the truth and then she’ll have to deal with it.” Why is it so hard for some people to deal with the truth? What are some things that you think your parents have a difficult time facing? How can dealing directly with the truth encourage better communication between you and your parents?

• Bobby says, “I’d made a commitment to her [Joanie] as a friend, and I couldn’t let her get caught because of me.” What does it mean to make a commitment to someone? Name situations in which keeping a commitment to a friend may be a wrong decision. Discuss the qualities of “true friendship.”

**ACTIVITIES**

• Bobby Marks reads and studies good literature. He mentions Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and J. D. Salinger. Select one of these writers and prepare a brief report about his contribution to American literature.

• Bobby gives his parents quick character sketches of Axel, Lolly, and Ace. Select one of these characters or pick any other character from the laundry and write a brief character sketch.

• Read several movie reviews from a local or a regional newspaper or both. Note the style of writing and the kinds of things reviewers notice. View Bobby’s favorite movie, *Shane*. Then, write a review of the movie for the *Rumson Lake Gazette*.

• Research the origin and purposes of unions. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of union involvement in such businesses as the Lenape Laundry. Then, write a letter to Roger Sinclair stating your position on unionization.

**LINKING THE NOVELS**

• Willie Rumson in *One Fat Summer* and Harley in *Summer Rules* may be considered bullies. Considering the difference in their ages, how are their actions similar? How are the reasons for their behavior different?
Dr. Kahn, Moe Bell, and Roger Sinclair all take advantage of Bobby. Compare and contrast the actions of each of these men. How does the experience of working with each of these men contribute to Bobby’s development as a man?

Bobby has a poor self-image in One Fat Summer. As he gets older, he develops a more positive sense of self. Write a paper contrasting Bobby’s self-image at age 14 with his self-image at age 18.

Bobby says that Joanie likes the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Find a Dickinson poem that Bobby might give to Joanie in One Fat Summer, and a poem that he might give to her in The Summerboy. How do these poetry choices reflect changes in Bobby and Joanie?

Ask your parents or other adults to tell you about the television program I’ve Got a Secret. Stage the show, choosing the secrets from the three novels.

Prejudice comes in many forms. Identify specific expressions of prejudice in each of the novels. What causes people to develop prejudices? What is the difference between prejudice and bigotry? Why is it important to develop tolerance and an understanding of others?

**FICTION CONNECTIONS**


**AGES 12–UP** During the summer following their junior year in high school, Ricky and his friend Nate take a job at a summer resort in the Sierra mountains, where they begin their journey into manhood. Sequel to *The Silent Treatment*.


**AGES 12–UP** Participating in a senior class play helps two teenage outcasts begin to understand betrayal and the true meaning of friendship.


**AGES 12–UP** Characters from many of Crutcher’s novels appear in these short stories that explore the inner lives of young adolescent males.

**AGES 12–UP** Contemporary issues, such as abortion, organized religion, and suicide, are among the topics that a senior class discusses in an effort to support a friend who is crying for help.


**AGES 12–UP** Growing up in Dublin, Ireland, Charlotte Collins (Charlie) wants to be accepted by her peers, but instead is tormented by the in-crowd at school.


**AGES 12–UP** Bridget wants the love of her adoptive father, and she longs to be thinner and more attractive. When she decides to give up her fantasies and face the real world, she becomes involved in a mystery that changes her outlook on life.


**AGES 10–UP** Zachary Beaver, the fattest boy in the world, comes to Antler, Texas, in the summer of 1971. At first, people tease him and call him unkind words, but when Toby Wilson and his friend Cal get to know Zachary, they find out the true meaning of friendship.


**AGES 12–UP** This collection of poetry about growing up treats the problems and concerns of adolescents in both a serious and humorous manner. More than half of the poems are told from the male point of view.


**AGES 12–UP** The only way that eighth-grader Simon Schultz can deal with the trauma caused by his overbearing mother is to record his private thoughts in a journal.


**AGES 12–UP** Overweight Dinky Hocker doesn’t appear bothered by her mother’s encounter-groups-at-home, or by her boyfriend’s attempt to get her to join Weight Watchers, but when she finally has enough, she finds a unique way to get the attention she needs.

AGES 12–UP Ted wants to be considered a hero and be noticed by the girls, so he takes a summer job as a lifeguard, where he quickly learns what being a true hero really means.


AGES 12–UP Like most 13-year-old girls, Judi wants to be thin and popular with the boys. Instead, she is fat and struggles with a poor self-concept. Through daily diary entries, she records her most personal thoughts regarding her dreams.


AGES 11–UP Twelve short stories by such writers as Gary Soto, Norma Fox Mazer, Ray Bradbury, Tim Wynne-Jones, and Michael Dorris explore the working world of young adults.


AGES 12–UP Michael, a new kid at school, is enlisted by Theo, the boy genius, to plot a scheme that will make everyone’s life better by wrecking the eighth-grade class bully.


AGES 12–UP The search for a new identity is the theme of this novel about an overweight girl and a former high school football player.


AGES 12–UP In this zany novel, two teenagers are convinced that a neighbor, an undertaker, has killed his wife.