

## READERS GUIDE

### Nancy Thayer on *The Perfect Man*

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark," a flaw is removed from a woman's face and she dies, because a perfect person can't live.

But modern-day women still cherish the dream of the perfect man. In some novels, they ride horses, own castles, give diamonds. In real life, we hope they're employed, have all their teeth, and behave with kindness to dogs, cats, and offspring.

I write about contemporary lives and people like the ones I know, with problems, flaws, hopes and dreams common to us all. I could invent a perfect man—but first, I'd have to figure out what the heck that means.

In *Summer Breeze*, I had the pleasure of writing about four good men. Even though he is a bad boy, I include Slade in that category. Can I tell you how many of my readers love Slade? My sister called me to protest because Bella chose Aaron when she could have had sexy Slade. But seriously, would you want to marry Slade? Would you really want to get pregnant, blow up like a turnip, give birth and not have sex for a few weeks, all the while worrying that Slade was flirting, or worse, with the delivery room nurse? (Not that I'm picking on nurses for flirting. My sister is a nurse. I worship nurses.)

No, I think we must rule out Slade as a candidate for the perfect man. But wait, maybe not! Maybe the question is: The perfect man for what?

Naturally—and I mean that in a few ways—we want our perfect man to be sexy. We fall in love with men in real life and in fiction because they've got serious sensual power that draws us to them. Of course not every woman feels that for every long-lashed man with bedroom eyes, which is, after all, a good thing.

Slade is sexy, but he's also a player, a charmer, and a bit of a wheeler-dealer. He's not completely trustworthy. He makes choices we might not approve of. He's the man our mothers warned us about, which is no doubt part of his appeal.

There's something inherently delicious, something inherently alive, something basically good in wanting to be bad, just for a moment, a moment out of time. Perhaps there are times when imperfection seems like just what the doctor ordered. We want to leave behind our routine lives with grumpy husbands, unpaid bills, whining children, critical mothers-in-law, dust balls under the sofa. Isn't that why we read?

But if in real life we want a man for more than a toe-curling fling, we want someone reliable, generous, capable, and well, good. True, we want that zing when we fall in love with a man. Each time we look at him, we want our hormones to light up like fireworks on the Fourth of July. But eventually, we'd really need a man who would lovingly give our kids a bath and put them to bed when we have to work late. And hang up the wet

towels. Am I asking too much? Well, a girl can dream . . . or write fiction.

*Summer Breeze* characters Aaron, Ben, and Josh are sexy, too. They're also smart, kind, and dependable. But are they perfect?

Josh kept an important secret from his wife, Morgan. He told Natalie the secret—was he a bad husband? Or was Morgan a less than perfect wife?

Ben's a scientist obsessed with his work, which makes him seem distant and, as he puts it, "mentally underground." He does his best to express himself with Natalie. But will that be good enough for a long-term relationship like marriage? Will he talk to his children?

In my humble opinion, Aaron is the best of the lot. Not only is he intelligent, handsome, and patient, but he truly wants Bella to find the work that will make her heart sing, and that was the starting point for this book, as it is the foundation of my life. I want the work I love and a good man. I want my women characters to have all that, too.

Perhaps I treasure the work I love and my good man because I once, long ago, knew a Slade and can still pick up a book or pop in a DVD and see a Slade.

My own daughter—my intelligent, feminist daughter, married to a wonderful and handsome man, with three children—surprised me when she told me she would choose Slade over Aaron. Perhaps it had something to do with the passage where Bella and Slade are looking at Mr. Wheeler's furniture:

"Bella wanted to kiss Slade . . . Among all this antique furniture, she felt caught in a dream: She was the maid, he was the master; she was the peasant selling flowers, he was the soldier. He was the pirate. She was his plunder."

Does this antiquated image thrive in all our feminine dreams?

Let me ask you: if you were Bella, who would you choose: Aaron or Slade? Or how would you describe your perfect man? Email me at [nancy@nancythayer.com](mailto:nancy@nancythayer.com) to let me know, and I'll post the results on my website.

#### Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Bella is so attached to her home that she considers breaking up with Aaron so she can stay at Dragonfly Lake. Why do you think she feels this way?

2. Do you identify with Bella's fear of change? Why does she finally decide to move to San Francisco? Would you have made the same decision?

3. While Bella finds comfort and nostalgia in the gargoyle cabinet and family antiques, Morgan feels trapped and isolated by the design of her luxurious new house. How can the appearance of a house affect the mood and family relationships within it? What is

the difference between a house and a home, and does it have anything to do with furniture?

4. On the day that Natalie and Ben decide to stop talking about science and art, Natalie comments that their work is “the most interesting part of us, or the defining part of us.” Do you agree? What would you identify as the defining part of yourself: the roles you play, your interests, your personality traits, or something else entirely?

5. Why does Natalie and Ben’s relationship work despite their different interests?

6. Slade, the bad-boy, wheeler-dealer antiques aficionado, tells Bella that he would give up his playboy lifestyle to be with her. Why do you think he makes that declaration? Do you believe him?

7. How does Slade’s decision to bring Dina Hannoush to the dinner party at the end of the summer reflect on his character?

8. Although we often don’t see it, Josh struggles with pursuing his dream, supporting his family, and spending enough time with his wife and son. How well does he manage the balancing act?

9. Is Josh right to conceal his novel from Morgan? How would you have handled the situation?

10. While Natalie’s exterior is that of a sleek and sophisticated New Yorker, she often believes that her thoughts and feelings are those of a child. Does the summer represent a growing-up process for Natalie? How do her attitudes towards Marlene, her mother, reflect her maturity?

11. Which of the characters do you identify the most with? Why?

12. The lakeside community seems like such a wonderful place to live. What is your ideal community?