LOON COVE SUMMER
by Donna Galanti
Teacher Guide : Grades 3-8

About Loon Cove Summer

This summer, 13-year-old Sarah plans to get unstuck. How? Swim in the lake again. Protect the loons. Stop grieving Mom. However, life at her family's Maine campground is shifting. As Sarah's world unravels, she plans a daring wilderness trek. But her journey becomes a test of courage, heart, and what it means to find your place in the wild and in the world.

Genre: Contemporary middle grade fiction
Themes: Grief, nature conservation, courage, family, personal growth
Age Range: 8–13 years

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think Sarah means when she says she feels "stuck"? Have you ever felt that way?

2. Sarah is passionate about protecting loons. What animal or cause would you feel strongly about protecting?

3. How does Theo help Sarah grow over the summer? How do friendships change us?

4. Grief is a major theme in this story. How does Sarah express her grief? What are healthy ways to handle grief?

5. What role does nature play in Sarah's healing?

6. Why do you think Sarah chose a solo adventure to find her voice? Was it brave or reckless—or both?

7. Share an act of bravery you've experienced through your own choices or someone else's. How did it change your perspective about yourself or that person? What helps you feel brave? What act of bravery do you wish you could do?

8. How does Sarah's relationship with her dad evolve during the story?

9. What does the story teach us about home—and how that definition can change? What does the word "home" mean to you? What people, places, or events relate to the meaning of home for you?

10. Sarah makes a difference in her world by helping save the loons. Do you believe just one person can make positive changes in the world? What act have you performed that made a difference?

11. Donna Galanti referenced material from her real life to write Loon Cove Summer including the campground her parents owned and operated, her love for birds, and the grief shared between her and her father over the loss of her mother. What details and events in your life would you be called to write about in a story?

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ACTIVITIES: ELEMENTARY (GRADES 3-5)

Loon Calls Sound Game

- Play audio clips of real loon calls (wail, tremolo, yodel, hoot).
- Students try to guess the meaning of each call (warning, finding a mate, locating family, etc.).
- Discuss how animals communicate and compare it to how humans express feelings.

"My Summer To-Do List" Writing

- Like Sarah's list in the book, students make their own short summer wish list.
- Prompt: What three adventures or challenges do you want to try this summer? Why?

Save the Loons Poster Project

- Provide paper and art supplies.
- Students design a poster encouraging people to protect loons (or another local animal).
- Display the posters in class or library.

Friendship Role-Play

- In pairs, act out a scene where one friend encourages another to try something new (like Sarah learning how to save loons).
- Reflect: How do friends help us be brave?

ACTIVITIES: MIDDLE SCHOOL (GRADES 6-8)

Journal Reflection on Courage

- Prompt: Sarah struggles to face the lake again after her mom died. Write about a time you had to face a fear. How did it feel before, during, and after?
- Encourage students to make connections between their lives and Sarah's.

Environmental Research Mini-Project

- In groups, research threats to loons (like boat traffic, pollution, or fishing lines).
- Each group presents a short "loon news report" with solutions for protecting them.

Character Hot Seat

- One student plays Sarah, another plays her dad, others play supporting characters.
- Classmates ask them questions about their choices and feelings.
- This helps dive deeper into character motivation.

Create a Cove Map

- Using details from the book, students draw a map of Loon Cove: the lake, islands on the lake, Sarah's lakeside cabins, loon nesting spots, favorite swimming area, etc.
- Then they label where key events in the story happen.

Grief and Healing Discussion

- Sarah misses her mom deeply.
- In small groups, discuss: How do people honor loved ones who have passed? What helps us heal?
- Students can create a symbolic item (like a memory box or drawing) that represents a way to remember someone.

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ACTIVITIES: GENERAL

Creative Writing:
Write a journal entry from Theo's point of view during a moment in the story.

Conservation Connection:
Research an endangered bird and present ways to protect it.

Bird Observer:
Create a bird-spotting log. With an adult, use the free Merlin Bird ID to learn about the birds you encounter. Include details about the birds in your log.

Campground Map Project:
Draw a map of your own fictional summer campground and give it a name.

Nature Journal:
Start your own summer journal with drawings, quotes, and reflections inspired by Sarah.

Courage Challenge:
Research three courageous people, how they inspired others, and why they inspire you.

INSPIRATION FROM DONNA'S REAL-LIFE CAMPGROUND!

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IN CONVERSATION WITH DONNA GALANTI

Q: What inspired you to write Loon Cove Summer?

A: Much of my real life. In the 1970s, my dad's dream was to own and operate a campground—and so we bought one. This is the setting of Loon Cove Summer. I even still have the original campground map that I used to create the story.

Growing up at a campground by a lake was a magical place to live. Loon Cove Summer is a nod to my childhood there—and rich with my love of loons, lakes, kayaking, raptors, and hiking!

Also, my Great Uncle Elmer was inspiration for adding in an Appalachian Trail scenario. When he was in his 60s, Uncle Elmer solo thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail from April to October—hiking 2,200+ miles from Georgia to Maine. On his thru-hike, an October snowstorm prevented Uncle Elmer from climbing Mount Katahdin in Maine and reaching the end of the trail at this mighty peak—just like Sarah's mother in Loon Cove Summer.

Q: It sounds so interesting that your family owned a campground just like Sarah in the book and you lived there! Did you live there year-round? What was the best part of that experience?

A: Yes, we lived at Bethel Woods Campground year-round (it's since been renovated and still there under a different name). The property had 75 campsites, a large main house that we lived in, a pool, a recreation hall, and a camp store. For an only child it was super fun to always have new kids to play with.

But one of my favorite things to do was to collect the trash and take it to the dump, just like Sarah does in Loon Cove Summer! We had an old 1965 Ford truck that was open in the back with wood paneled sides. After my dad and I collected the trash from every campsite, I got to stand in the back of the truck and hang on for dear life as we cruised down Route 3 to the dump—which was on Ta Da Dump Road (and still is!).

Q: How did you come to choose the state of Maine as the setting for your story?

A: Funny enough, the story originally started off set in New Hampshire—just like where I lived in a campground as a young girl. However, logistically I had to change the setting to the adjoining state of Maine because the Appalachian Trail is featured in the story along with the trail's end-point atop the fierce and mighty Mount Katahdin.

I also love Maine and have a personal connection to it with special memories. When I was a little girl, every summer my parents and I vacationed in Bar Harbor, Maine. We'd camp, hike through Acadia National Park, and take a ferry to bike on remote islands. Recently, I created new memories with my husband and son on a family vacation there.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DONNA GALANTI

Q: What do you hope readers come away with after reading your book?

A: My hope is to appeal to young nature lovers, adventure seekers, and fans of environmental causes—and empower kids to be their own heroes. I also wish to inspire young people to build strong connections with the natural world.

With Sarah's volunteer efforts in the story, I would love for this to compel young readers to perform service work for a cause that is important to them—and learn that they can make a difference, too!

Lastly, I hope if you read Loon Cove Summer that it inspires you to seek out the call of the loon—and seek more birds in your life. Take the time to go outside and be uplifted by birds all around you, for they fill our world with beauty and song. Perhaps they may spark a story in you, too.

Q: What advice would you give to young writers when developing stories?

A: Being a writer means you should also be a reader. So read as many kinds of books as you can to open yourself up to all types of stories. Also, allow yourself to write a messy first draft of your story. Finish it first, then go back and revise and edit it. Every author must do revisions on their book. It's how a book gets better. Have fun with it! There are no limits to what you can write about. You are only limited by your imagination—which should have no boundaries! Remember, that every story you write is unique. No one will ever write the exact same story as you. So embrace your unique storytelling style.

Q: Do you have a favorite character in this story? If so, what makes them your favorite?

A: I love them all! I'm especially torn between Sarah's Buddhist Uncle JuJu who spouts off words of wisdom and insight (I could use a wise guide in my life!) or Theo, the boy Sarah meets who also loves loons, plays the banjo, and photographs things that are disappearing. I'll go with Theo. He is enthusiastic, heartfelt, and kind—a true friend for life.

Q: When did you decide to become a writer?

A: I wanted to be a writer ever since I read The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis when I was seven years old. I attended school in England then, housed in a magical castle, and wrote my first fantasy story about dodo birds, wizards, and a flying ship—and have been writing fantasy ever since but also now realistic fiction.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DONNA GALANTI

Q: What do you do when you're stuck in writing a story? Do you have any advice for how to create a story?

A: Coming up with stories can be hard—and even harder to complete! I offer you an invitation to imagine. One way to do this is to brainstorm. This means to spontaneously produce an idea or solution to a problem.

Here's how to get started: Sit at a desk with a notebook and pencil. Set a timer for 15 minutes. Choose one of these 3 selections to brainstorm about a story idea:

- A pilot in a dungeon
- A medieval knight in the Amazon rainforest
- A ghost in a waterslide park

Write nonstop for 15 minutes using the character and setting you chose to create a story idea or to write the beginning of a story. Throw your character into the setting right away so we can see them in action.

When the timer goes off, see if you have a story idea that you like and want to continue writing about! Here's a tip: borrow from world history for settings and characters to use in your brainstorming.

Also, look to your life for writing material. Everyone has experienced things to write about, no matter the age. Whether it's going on vacation, moving to a new home, making a friend, or hiking a mountain. You can take real-life events, places, and people and "fictionalize" it, meaning to take the experience and then make it part of a made-up story.

Sit down and brainstorm about your life including:

·The places you've traveled to
·Activities you like to do
·How you spend time with your friends
·Family members and family events
·Describe the town and house you live in
·Any pets you may have, what kind they are, and how you enjoy them
·Your favorite movies, food, music, books and why
·Any adventures you've had!

TIP: Think about the many "firsts" you've had in your life like your first pet, first time flying on a plane, or first time moving to a new school. What was that like? Journal about the experience.

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Q: What's an element of craft you explored in Loon Cove Summer and what tips can you share with young authors for using this element?

A: In Loon Cove Summer, I explore using journals, lists, and handwritten notes in my story. The main character, Sarah, has discovered an old trail journal from her late mother who once thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail.

Also, Sarah's father leaves her handwritten notes with chores to do, and she lists what she learns about the birds she is trying to protect and creates a "Summer Do" list with her friend. These entries add another layer for us to see inside Sarah's thoughts, relationships, and world in different ways—and help us understand how these letters change her beliefs and affect her choices.

Using tools like lists, journals, newspapers, quizzes, emails, or notes can be a creative way to incorporate information into your story without doing an "information-dump" on the reader. As a writer, if you think you have an info-dump, whether in dialogue or narrative, try using one of these tools to express information in an active way that breaks up long chunks of text.

In reading books, take note of authors who use these techniques and how they deliver information in creative ways while also moving the story forward.

Q: The story sprinkles in lots of information about loons. What was your research process like? Was there anything specific that stood out to you or something interesting you'd like to share?

A: I did a lot of loon research online and from books, especially The Common Loon: Spirit of Northern Lakes by Judith W. McIntyre. Each year I'm lucky to stay at a friend's lake house in northern New York, a rich loon habitat. Their haunting tremolos call to me as I glide in my kayak to visit with them. And since the Appalachian Trail, campground life, and a raptor rehabilitation center are also featured in Loon Cove Summer, I did quite a bit of research for all those as well.

Here are 5 fun facts I learned about loons:

1.Loons can dive up to 200 feet and swim underwater for five minutes.
2.Loons live long, twenty to thirty years.
3.The four basic loon calls are: hoots, wails, tremolos, yodels.
4.Loons build nests on shorelines, so they are vulnerable to predators and flooding. The male and female loon build a nest from dead plant materials.
5.Loons have been around for at least 35 million years, making them one of the oldest bird families.

Here are 3 fun facts I learned about raptors:
1.Raptors are birds of prey and have hooked beaks and taloned feet.
2.Peregrine falcons are the fastest creatures on earth and can dive over 200 mph!
3.The term raptor comes from the Latin word rapio, meaning "to seize or take by force".

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Q: Why did you write a novel about birds for kids?

A: I love loons and raptors and this is why they both play a big part in my story. They are such different kinds of birds. Raptors soar the skies and loons soar on water. Sarah, the main character in my story, also loves raptors and spends her time volunteering at a raptor rehabilitation center.

I volunteer with the National Audubon Society, which strives to conserve and restore habitats of birds. As a volunteer, I assist with school programs to help young people discover the wonder of nature, birds, and biodiversity through hands-on learning and bird ambassadors. These ambassadors are birds that have been injured and deemed non-releasable back into the wild. Sad fact: Most wild bird injuries are caused by human interaction like collisions with cars, buildings, boats, windows, and fishing lines.

And birds are everywhere around us, not just in the natural world, yet we often don't notice them. They live in every environment. In cities, meadows, forests, deserts, swamps, and suburban neighborhoods. Birds are so critical to our world. Since the beginning of human time on Earth, they've lifted our eyes to the skies. They eat harmful insects and rodents, indicate changes in habitats, and best of all, they entertain us with melody and color!

Q: What is your writing process like? Do you listen to music? Write in a special place? Edit as you go or write and then edit?

A: I've learned not to edit as I go as that hinders me from finishing a book. Most of my story ideas originate from walks in the woods. I'm a huge nature lover and it's where visions come to life. Then I draft an outline, world build, develop the characters, and begin writing. I sometimes create musical soundtracks for writing to inspire me. I also love to sequester myself on retreats in a cabin to immerse myself in the magic of story.

ABOUT DONNA GALANTI

Donna Galanti is the children's book author of the Unicorn Island series, Joshua and the Lightning Road series, and Loon Cove Summer. She has lived in fun locations including England, her family-owned campground in New Hampshire, and in Hawaii where she served as a U.S. Navy photographer. Donna is an avid outdoor adventurer and nature lover. She volunteers for the Old-Growth Forest Network and the National Audubon Society. For details on her books, events, and school programs, visit her at donnagalanti.com.