

Acts of Love Short Guide

Acts of Love by Maureen Daly

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Overview

Acts of Love is the story of a young girl's coming-of-age and falling in love.

It is also a novel of family life, of an unusually warm and close-knit family and the ways they adapt to changes they are forced to make. Henrietta Caldwell, called Retta, is sixteen and a junior in high school when two events occur that alter her life. One is getting to know Dallas Dobson, a quiet, sensitive youth two years her senior and her social antithesis. Retta's family is cultured, traditional and, although no longer rich, still possessed of high social status as the Caldwells. Dallas wears well-worn clothes, mucks stables to help support himself, and is saddled with a father who drinks to excess.

There is between them an instant attraction that startles Retta with its intensity.

The second important event that occurs relates to the State Highway Commission's decision to confiscate a portion of Caldwell land for a new highway. Retta is outraged at this invasion of their woods and is shocked to see William Penn oaks two hundred years old bulldozed and burned. She learns, however, there is nothing that can be done as the Right of Eminent Domain allows the land to be taken for minimum compensation. Complicating the family's problems is the fact the newspaper the family has owned for over one hundred years is losing money due to a shrinking population in their rural Pennsylvania town and a diminished business community that previously bought advertising. When an opportunity to sell the newspaper plant develops, Mr. Caldwell does so and moves the family to California. As the plane leaving Pennsylvania gains altitude and heads west, Retta feels she is leaving behind everything in life she holds dear.

In portraying the feelings and emotions Retta experiences, Daly mirrors the tumult often encountered in growing up. She gives a sensitive portrayal of first love and underscores the vulnerability that love inevitably brings.

Although there is joy in Retta's relationship with Dallas, there is also great pain. Daly points the reader toward the responsibility one must assume for his own destiny. When Dallas finds work for the summer near Retta so they can have time together, Retta looks to her mother for reassurance that this is the right decision. Her mother emphasizes that happiness is never assured. "It's all up to you and Dallas," she tells her.

With that, Retta—and the reader—must be satisfied.

About the Author

Maureen Daly electrified the publishing world with the publication of her landmark young adult novel *Seventeenth Summer* in 1942. She was not yet twenty years old. The novel became a best-seller and has since sold over 1.5 million hardcover copies, as well as millions of the paperback editions. *Seventeenth Summer*, however, was not Daly's first writing success.

When she was fifteen, she wrote a story entitled "Fifteen" which won third prize in Scholastic magazine's short story contest. The following year, she won first prize with her story "Sixteen." "Sixteen" was selected for inclusion in the 1938 O. Henry Memorial Award volume and was later reprinted in *Redbook* magazine. It has since been published in more than three hundred anthologies and in twelve languages.

The text of "Sixteen" appears in *Acts of Love* under the guise of papers which Retta Caldwell discovers in a trunk in the attic of her home.

Daly was born in 1921 in Castlecaufield, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland.

Her father brought the family to America when three of his daughters were under three years of age. They settled in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, on the banks of Lake Winnebago. It was here Daly went to high school and grew up.

She chose to pursue a career in journalism despite her early success in fiction.

She became a reporter-columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* and later an associate editor of *Ladies Home Journal*. She met her husband William McGivern in Chicago at an autograph party for *Seventeenth Summer*, and they were married December 28, 1948. McGivern, also a writer, and Daly moved to Europe to free-lance and remained until their two children, Megan and Patrick, were teen-agers. They returned to the United States to live, first in Pennsylvania and later in California.

A series of personal events inspired Daly to write again for the young adult audience. Daly's husband died of cancer in November 1983. Soon after, her daughter Megan also developed cancer, and died thirteen months after her father. *Acts of Love* became a book of catharsis as Daly wrote of her husband and Megan in the roles of Retta Caldwell and her father. Daly chose to write of a time when her family was living in Pennsylvania and a highway was built, bisecting their land and forcing the family to resettle in California.

She also wrote of young Megan's first experience at falling in love. While the book is about real people, it is a work of fiction. Daly says she plans to write Megan's "real" story in a work entitled *Megan: A Different Love Story* at a time when the writing is less painful. In 1990 Daly published *First a Dream* which continues the love story of Retta Caldwell and Dallas Dobson after they move to Thirty-Nine Palms, California.



Daly tends to write microscopically of the things she knows. Her hometown of Fond du Lac is the setting of *Seventeenth Summer*, as well as other stories, just as *Acts of Love* and *First a Dream* have their inception in autobiographical experiences. Daly's forte is the power to capture feelings and sensations so vividly that her books form an emotional bond with her readers. As Judy Blume suggests on the dust jacket of *Acts of Love*, one remembers long after the reading of *Seventeenth Summer* the longing, yearning emotions of *Angie Morrow*. This is attested by the fact that the perennially popular book, now fifty years old, has never gone out of print. *Acts of Love* and *First a Dream* represent a long awaited reappearance of a writer who helped launch the young adult novel as a legitimate form of literature.

Setting

The story opens in the area around Zenith, Pennsylvania, a rural community thirty-five miles from Philadelphia.

Retta Caldwell, her father and mother, and her younger brother live in a sturdy, two-story house with six bedrooms and three baths on an acreage that has been in the family for nearly three hundred years. Retta attends the county high school near Zenith where she drives each day in her yellow Volkswagen, a gift from her parents on her sixteenth birthday. The Caldwells live unusually ordered lives with dinner at seven in the dining room where the Gorham coffee service adorns the sideboard and Grandmother Caldwell's silver candlesticks lend grace to the table.

Change, however, comes to the Caldwells, as the six-lane highway, designed to carry traffic from Baltimore to Philadelphia, takes twenty acres of Caldwell land. After selling their homestead, they move across the United States to Thirty-Nine Palms, California, a designed community under construction in the desert. There Carter Caldwell erects a newspaper plant, and the family moves into a sprawling adobe ranch house, adorned with three transplanted palm trees and a cement patio. They adjust to eating their meals at a glass-topped table on the patio—without silver candlesticks or the Gorham coffee service. It is within these environs, the countryside in and around Zenith and the home in Thirty-Nine Palms, that Retta Caldwell's story is played out.



Social Sensitivity

There is little in *Acts of Love* of a socially sensitive nature. The novel does, however, deal with the social problem of ecology versus "progress" as Daly details the environmental destruction resulting from the construction of a new highway. The six-lane by-pass is deemed necessary by the State Highway Commission, although its construction will cut a swath through cherished woodlands and destroy whole stands of trees. The dilemma thus presented by Daly is not right against wrong, but right against right and what is the larger good. The book raises such provocative issues as: 1) Are the rights of the group more important than the rights of the individual? 2) Is the need for better transportation a more important consideration than environmental protection? 3) Can the Right of Eminent Domain be abused as decisions that affect not only the ecology, but the well-being of entire towns, are often made at a distance by people with little knowledge of or concern for an area? 4) Is the individual in a society powerless against the workings of government? Daly does not explore in depth the questions she raises nor does she make an attempt to give both sides of an issue. Instead, she presents the Caldwell's opposition to the highway and writes of the destruction its building brings. The other issues are, nevertheless, an inherent part of the whole.

Literary Qualities

Acts of Love is distinguished neither by its plot development nor its characters. Elements of the plot, the romance between Retta and Dallas, the building of the highway, Retta's mother's earlier infatuation with Dallas's father, and the move to California, are so loosely connected they appear to be separate sketches. Likewise, the characters are too one-sided to be memorable. However, there are two qualities which lift the book above the mundane and make it often powerful. One of these is the lack of condescension with which the author treats her characters. Although Retta is only sixteen and this is her first romance, Daly does not belittle or demean its seriousness. When Retta questions God, "Are you going to break my heart till I can't stand it anymore?" the reader accepts as true that Retta's heart is breaking. It is this honest portrayal of the feelings of her characters that provides value for the readers of Acts of Love. As they examine the world Daly has created, they can see beyond Zenith to catch glimpses of their own lives and times. Because Daly has given legitimacy to the feelings of her characters, the reader's own feelings and emotions assume legitimacy.

A second quality that enriches the book and increases its literary merit is Daly's use of language. She has a marked facility for descriptive prose that evokes mood and tone. The precision of her language gives readers a focused look, whether she is describing feelings, locales, or merely wasps at a window. They see the Monarch butterfly drift onto a wand of goldenrod, hear the liquid night noises as snow melts and icicles shorten with every drop, smell the odor of gasoline and warm rubber on the school parking lot, feel Retta's excitement as she looks at Dallas and thinks, "there are other people here, but he and I are completely together in this room."

Other qualities that enhance the book are: 1) it deals with contemporary issues such as the construction of the highway that bisects the Caldwell lands and destroys woods, meadows, and orchards in its path, and the disappearance of the rural town in today's urban society; 2) it gives the young adult reader two attractive role models in Retta and Dallas; and 3) its conclusion is open-ended as befits real life.



Themes and Characters

Acts of Love is Retta's story, but it also belongs to Dallas Dobson and, in many ways, to Zenith, Pennsylvania.

The novel depicts, along with its story of teen-age love, the demise of a rural town. Zenith is a town that once bustled with good health, with the goings and comings of its residents, and with the business of buying and selling in its streets. Now, however, its streets are dominated by empty buildings and failed businesses, and it keeps getting smaller and smaller. Daly's portrayal of Zenith is typical of the disappearance of many rural towns across America.

Retta is a winsome heroine, sensitive and caring, devoted to family and with a strong propensity for doing right.

Her major shortcoming as a character is that she is too good, almost without fault. Unlike most teen-agers, she has no problems with her family, no rebellion over rules, no resentment of constraints. For example, when her father limits the number of phone calls she may make or receive, she is merely amused. She is understanding and stoic about the family's move to California, although the move will disrupt every aspect of her life and separate her from Dallas. She is keenly loyal to her friend Charlie and is unusually empathic toward the feelings of others. The first day Dallas appears in class, she knows intuitively he is "hurting." Likewise, at the senior prom, she feels sympathy for Junior Provanza and his sister when she realizes they are too shy to dance with each other and are merely spectators at the prom. She urges Dallas to switch partners with them a few times because "it's the senior prom for them, too." Retta is wise beyond her years when it comes to her relationship with Dallas. Realizing her intense attraction to him could lead her to make unwise decisions, she gives her father the key she possesses to an empty cottage that once belonged to a family servant, Aunt Blue. Retta could have kept the key and used the cottage for trysts with Dallas.

If Daly has erred in keeping Retta's foibles well-hidden, she errs in the same way in the young hero she creates. Dallas is tall, muscular, and good looking. He is also determined, hardworking, and responsible. He has a job at the Kennelly stables each morning before school, keeps up with his school work in spite of frequent absences, fills in for his dad at his job when the older man is drinking, and does the housework and cooking for the two of them.

Dallas is not only older than his peers, he is years beyond them in maturity.

He is keenly aware of this the night of the senior prom when he admits the event has no magic for him. "Maybe I'm too old, or maybe I wasn't young long enough," he says. He is amazingly devoted to a drunken father who lies to him, uses him, and is churlish and unpleasant. In spite of Dallas's rough, nomadic upbringing, he has innately good manners born of his sensitivity to others. Dallas is also honorable. When he and Retta experience a moment of intense passion, when it seems inevitable they will



consummate their love, it is Dallas who breaks the spell and halts their ardor. The one time Dallas fails to do justly, when he refuses to give the sheriff a deposition about a near-drowning he and Retta witness, he is motivated by loyalty to his father who does not want him to get involved.

Even this failing is eventually corrected.

If Retta and Dallas seem too wholesome, too virtuous, to be real, they are nonetheless endearing. They have recognizable emotions—they laugh, they cry, they become embarrassed, and most importantly, they fall in love.

Daly takes young love seriously and she engenders in Retta and Dallas an understanding of the essence of the other. Their story provides assurance to the reader that others have endured and survived the intensity, the turmoil, the pain, and the joy of falling in love.

Daly rises above the storybook image of her characters as she develops her themes. There is no suggestion that falling in love cures all of life's ills or that there will be only happiness ever after. Daly exposes the vulnerability of young love as she pushes Retta and Dallas toward choosing a direction that is right for them, underlining at the same time that one cannot know from the beginning what the ending will be, and that reaching for happiness is always a gamble.



Topics for Discussion

1. Retta Caldwell is an admirable heroine. For example, she is trustworthy, dependable, responsible, and mature. She is loyal to her friends and sensitive and caring about others, and she and her family experience few conflicts. Has the author been fair to the reader in making Retta so exemplary?

Would you have liked Retta better or less if she had exhibited negative traits as well as good ones?

2. Retta is angered by the devastation to Caldwell lands caused by building the new highway. However, there is the unquestionable need today for faster, safer transportation. Which do you consider the greater need, preservation of the environment or fast, safe transportation for the public? Can they co-exist?

3. The Caldwell family has no recourse but to permit the new highway to cut through their lands as the law gives to the state the right to decide what is best for the majority of the people. In a democratic society, which is the more important goal: to consider what is best for the majority or to defend the rights of the individual?

4. One plot element in the novel involves an earlier infatuation of Retta's mother with Dallas's father. What do you think was the author's purpose in adding this twist to the story? Would the plot have been as effective if this element had been omitted?

5. Retta discovers the letter her mother had written as a young girl about meeting a stranger with whom she became intensely infatuated. What are your feelings about "love at first sight?" What are the joys and sorrows of falling for someone without knowing anything about that person? Explain your answer.

6. Retta returns to her father the key she has retained to Aunt Blue's empty cottage. What does this act tell you about Retta?

7. Dallas Dobson had an older brother, Sam Houston, who was killed in a motorcycle accident. In what ways might Dallas's life been different if his brother had lived?

8. When Retta's family moves to California, they allow Retta the option of going with them or of remaining in Pennsylvania and boarding with Charlie and her mother. Retta chooses to go with her family rather than remaining to complete high school. Is this the decision you would have made? What are the reasons for your decision?

9. Dallas is fiercely loyal to his father, often going to great lengths to care for him and help him maintain his job. In your opinion, what do children owe to their parents?

10. Retta quotes lines from the famous poet T. S. Eliot that say, "April is the cruelest month" Think about each month of the calendar year. What would you personify as "the cruelest Acts of Love month?" What are your reasons?



11. The author ends her book by having Retta and her family move to California and adopt a completely new lifestyle. What other ways might she have ended this story that would satisfy the reader?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Super highways can speed traffic from one locale to another but often by-pass small towns as is the case with Zenith, the town where the Caldwell newspaper is languishing. What are the positive and negative effects of such highways?

2. Mr. Caldwell says to his son, "Laws are made by men, and laws must be obeyed by men." There are many who would agree with this.

There are others who would disagree and point to the American Revolution and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call to civil disobedience as cases in point.

How do you stand on this issue? State your position and defend it.

3. The Caldwells serve dinner with style in the family dining room and use the time to talk to each other. Many families have abandoned such "niceties" for a more free-wheeling lifestyle.

Children are allowed to eat in front of the television set or to fix their own meals and eat when hungry. What are the advantages of each lifestyle? How you would arrange the family dinner hour if you were in charge?

4. Research the establishment of the Statute of Right of Eminent Domain and find out what you can about it.

What is the history of the statute?

What is the justification for its use?

Would you defend or condemn the statute?

5. When Charlie's mother, Mrs. Amberson, says to Retta that Charlie is "all I've got," Retta is angered. She replies, "Parents can love children and enjoy them, but they can't own them." Do children "belong" to their parents? If parents support children, how much control should they have over them?

6. Moves like that of the Caldwells from the East Coast to the West Coast are common in today's mobile society.

Discuss a move you have made and the changes it has effected. Compare your reactions to those of Retta, who feels alienated from the joy and security of her life in Pennsylvania.

7. Oral history provides a vital link between generations. Interview a person from an older generation—a grandparent, perhaps—to learn something of the changes over the years in dating and marrying customs. For example, it was once common in rural communities to "shivaree" newly married couples, a practice which has almost



disappeared. ("Shivaree" means to gather at a couple's home on their wedding night and make as much noise as possible. Sometimes pranks were played on the couple.) Compare your findings with the mores and practices of today.

For Further Reference

Fakih, Kimberly Olson. "The Long Wait for Maureen Daly." *Publishers Weekly* (June 27, 1986): 36-39. The author conducts a telephone interview with Daly just before the publication of *Acts of Love*. Daly speaks of the deaths of her husband and daughter and her motivation for writing the novel. She also talks about the publication of *Seventeenth Summer* and her own feelings about its instant success and durability.

The article takes a look at Daly's career and fills in the years since *Seventeenth Summer* made its debut.

Fuller, Muriel, ed. *More Junior Authors*.

New York: H. W. Wilson, 1963: 59.

The article contains a brief autobiographical sketch by Daly and a look at the work she did prior to 1963.



Related Titles

In *First a Dream*, sequel to *Acts of Love*, Daly continues the romance of Retta and Dallas. The story begins with Dallas's arrival in Thirty-Nine Palms to work for the summer at Rancho Arabian caring for the Bradleys' Arabian horses. Dallas proves to be a valued hired hand, even supervising the birth of a foal to an expensive mare who unexpectedly delivers. The romance between Retta and Dallas does not progress as well as they had envisioned, however, as Dallas seeks a commitment and understanding from Retta she is unprepared to give. Dallas matures and eventually concludes he should return to Pennsylvania, finish his last semester of high school, and accept the college scholarship he has been offered.

An unexpected inheritance makes it possible for Retta also to return to Pennsylvania to complete her senior year and to await the day she may be ready to give the commitment Dallas desires.

Like *Acts of Love*, *Seventeenth Summer* is the story of a young girl's growing up and falling in love. Angie Morrow is seventeen, just graduated from high school, and marking time until she goes away to college. Then she meets Jack. Angie is more amazed than anyone when Jack begins to date her, as boys have never paid her much attention. Through the months of June, July, and August, their feelings for each other deepen. Their pleasure in the relationship, however, is made bittersweet by the knowledge that September will bring inevitable changes. Told in the first person, *Seventeenth Summer*, is an honest, straight-forward probing of a young girl's emotions through an intensely personal period of her life as she experiences first love. The novel was dramatized in 1949 and filmed by Warner Brothers.



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