

Angel Face Short Guide

Angel Face by Norma Klein

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Overview

Angel Face, written in 1984, reflects the problems and values of a modern urban family. Like most of Klein' fiction, it is written in a direct, conversational, "no punches barred" style. It chronicles the breakdown of an uppermiddle-class family as seen through the eyes of the youngest son, fifteen-year-old Jason. It seems that all six members of the family have at least one problem, for Klein manages to include all of the following within the family setting: divorce, drugs, mid-life crisis, anorexia, dyslexia, and suicide.

As the novel develops and the family Photo of Norma Klein by Matthew Miles.

becomes even more dysfunctional, Klein includes an interracial relationship and an affair with a married man.

About the Author

Norma Klein was born May 13, 1938, in New York City and lived there until her death on April 25, 1989.

Klein's father, Emanuel Klein, was a Freudian psychoanalyst; her mother, Sadie Frankel Klein, was an accomplished tennis player; and her one younger brother, Victor, became a social worker. The author described her parents as "nonreligious Jews, politically left-wing, intellectual."

From age three to thirteen, Klein attended the Dalton School in New York and graduated from Elizabeth Irwin High School in 1956. She went to Cornell University for one year, then to Barnard College where she received her B.A. in Russian in 1960, achieving cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa distinctions. She earned her master's degree in Slavic languages from Columbia University in 1963. She stated that she studied Russian because of her love for the short stories of Anton Chekhov, adding that if she were on a deserted island and could have the works of only two authors, she would pick Anton Chekhov and Jane Austen.

Klein married Erwin Fleissner, a molecular biologist, on July 27, 1963. They had two daughters, Jennifer Luise (Jenny), born 1967, and Katherine Nicole (Katie), born 1970. After her marriage, Klein changed her plans to study for a Ph.D. and decided to write.

Klein's prolific writing career, which began at age nineteen when one of her short stories was first published, spanned more than two decades. She wrote fiction, verse, and short stories for children, adolescents, and adults. In 1978, *School Library Journal* included Klein's *Love Is One of the Choices* in its Best Books of the Year list. *Girls Can Do Anything* was selected for Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year and as a Junior Literary Guild selection. *Dinosaur's Housewarming Party*, another of her children's books, was also named a Junior Literary Guild selection. Klein's adult short stories have been selected to appear in the 1963, 1965, and 1983 editions of *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, as well as the 1969 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*.

Setting

There are few clues that indicate that this novel takes place in a certain year or in a certain town. It may take place in New York, for many of Klein's novels have a New York setting; however, there are no specific references to New York landmarks. The father is the editor of a political magazine, Human Rights; therefore, the setting could easily be New York or another large, metropolitan city. Klein once commented on the setting, noting: "I've always loved New York which is the background for many of my novels. It seemed to me when I began writing books for kids that most teenage novels were set in the midwest or the subur I wanted to portray the kind of teenager I was and the kind my kids were—not cheerleaders or football stars."

Regardless of the city, the setting is not the dominant element of this story.

The plot, with a mirage of different themes, is the major element of this Klein novel.

At the end of the novel, the father, his new wife, and his sons relocate to California. Although no dates are given in the novel, there are a few references that would lead readers to believe that it is taking place sometime in the 1980s (Jason has studied the Vietnam War in school, and it seems like "ancient history."



Social Sensitivity

This novel is definitely for mature readers. Some parents of even high school students may object to the issues discussed and the manner in which they are discussed. All of the following topics are at least mentioned while others are explored in depth: divorce, drugs, mid-life crisis, anorexia, dyslexia, suicide, and sex. Not all parents or teachers will appreciate Klein's treatment of these issues, especially her presentation of drugs and their use by the main character; nor will some readers appreciate the attention given to teen-age sexuality and the coming of age of the main character.

Klein does not preach morals, as she herself notes: I loathe books that try to teach or end with a moral lesson. My feeling is if you want to preach, become a preacher. Books should entertain, move, delight, not hammer the reader over the head.

Klein has also noted, "I still feel there are not enough fine, realistic novels for kids of any ages, and I now see that the few there are will always, to some extent, be under attack for doing precisely what they set out to do, describing the world as it is." *Angel Face* may also fit into this category of being too realistic for many readers, especially young teen-agers.

Commenting on her own characters she notes, "My heroes and heroines tend to grow up as I did, in Manhattan, in a world which cherishes and encourages individuality. My characters are usually intellectual, thoughtful, responsible and, occasionally, sexually active." She has also pointed out, "Most of my teenage characters are not only urban but Jewish, and have a wry, Woody Allenish sensibility based on a mocking inner commentary on the world and oneself."

Literary Qualities

This novel is written in an easy-to-read style. The vocabulary is simple, seventh-grade level, and the plot is easy to follow. Klein employs much dialogue, some of it witty. Some readers may object to the choice of words used by many of the characters, for profanity is abundant throughout the novel.

The first-person point of view is effective. The plot evolves out of the problems of Jason's family and inner circle of friends. His parents' divorce is the main problem. Most of the problems, such as drugs, dyslexia, and anorexia, are never fully addressed but are only introduced in a superficial manner. Klein uses dialogue to move most of the plot. There are few and very limited descriptions throughout the novel, and the tone in general is sarcastic.



Themes and Characters

Through the eyes of the main character, Klein addresses numerous themes in this short novel: divorce, sexuality and sexual behavior, suicide, midlife crisis, anorexia, dyslexia, and biracial relationships.

The novel's title comes from the nickname of the main character and first-person narrator, Jason, who is affectionately called "Angel Face" by his mother and sarcastically called the same by his eighteen-year-old brother Ty. Jason's obsession through most of the novel seems to be to "make it" with his girlfriend. When Jason is not thinking about sex, he is smoking pot.

Meanwhile, his brother Ty is practically living at his girlfriend's house, and while sex is not graphically described, there are many references to it.

In fact, the mother makes numerous references to the father's and sons' sexual experiences, and she does not waste words.

The mother and father are splitting up. The very first words of the novel are, in fact, "Who is she? Who is she?"

The father is packing his suitcase to leave his wife of twenty-seven years. It is a bitter scene between the two as the younger son watches. The father used to write political speeches but now he is the editor of a political magazine, Human Rights. He is going to marry a somewhat younger woman, Randall Wormwood Hamilton, referred to as Randy. The mother is forty-six years old and has not worked since starting a family, about twenty-three years ago.

She is extremely bitter and sarcastic.

Her language would make a sailor blush; perhaps her speech is a reflection of her demented mind, for she commits suicide at the end of the novel by driving her car into a wall.

There are two sisters in the novel who play minor roles. Andy is the older sister, a twenty-three-year-old law student who is having an affair with a married man who has two young children. The younger sister, Erin, has an eating disorder which seems to be anorexia. Erin attends a private school; she is sixteen and anemic. She seems to have a definite personality disorder, but the reader does not see her that often in the novel to develop any real interest in her character.

Various girlfriends and boyfriends appear throughout the story. Ty has a girlfriend, Julliet, whom he practically lives with, and Jason or "Angel Face" has a girlfriend, Vicki. Then there is a friend of Jason's, a black male who has a white girlfriend. With the exception of Otis, it is implied that all of the characters are Jewish and middle class.

Those are the principal characters in this soap opera.

In addressing such a variety of themes, it seems that Klein has hit but missed: There is a breadth of themes but no depth—merely a hodgepodge of themes, none sufficiently addressed.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think that Jason's parents should be getting a divorce? Do you think that the mother or the father is more to blame for the marriage falling apart? Do you think that they should try to save the marriage?

2. Jason smokes "pot" or marijuana.

Do you think that a fifteen-year-old should be doing this? Do you think that anyone should be doing this?

Why?

3. Do you know very much about anorexia? Have you ever known anyone who had anorexia? Do you know the symptoms of anorexia? What are they?

4. Have you known anyone with a learning disability? Have you known anyone with dyslexia? How did it affect their ability to learn? How did it affect your attitude toward him/her?

5. Did you identify with any character in this novel? With whom did you identify? Why?

6. Do you think that Jason's parents were good role models? Explain why or why not.

7. Did you find humor in this book?

If so, do you remember particularly humorous scenes or lines?

8. Would you end this novel differently? How would you end it?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Klein implies that sixteen-year-old Erin has anorexia. Research this topic and present a summary of your findings.

2. Jason has dyslexia. Do you know anyone who is dyslexic? Interview someone who has dyslexia and ask him or her what it is like to have this learning disability. Visit your school or public library and research this topic. Also try to interview a special education instructor about dyslexia. Combine all of your findings in a written report.

3. If you were writing this novel, would you have it end the same way?

If not, rewrite the last chapter. If you would have it end the same way, explain why.

4. Norma Klein has written many novels. Compare *Angel Face* to one of these other novels by Klein: *Mom, the Wolf Man and Me*; *Tomboy*; *Breaking Up*; or *Beginner's Love*.

5. Choose one scene from the novel to act out. Assign the character roles to different members of your class. Direct the scene and present it to the class.

What insights into the psychology of the characters have you gained by acting them out?

6. Read the "Dear Abbey" column in the newspaper, then choose one character from *Angel Face* and write to Dear Abbey from his or her point of view.

Pretend that you are the character and tell Dear Abbey your problems and what your life is like. Ask Abbey for advice.

7. Jason smokes marijuana. Research the effects that this drug has on the body. Explain the effects to the class in a written or oral report.



For Further Reference

Garrett, Agnes, and Helga P. McCue.

Authors and Artists for Young Adults.

Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1989.

This twelve-page article is biographical information on Klein's life and writing. A complete list of Klein's novels and awards is given, along with autobiographical comments by Klein about her writing.

Kirkpatrick, D. L. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. 3d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. This offers analytical comments on Klein's major books, a supplemented list of her published novels, and a brief biographical sketch.

Klein, Norma. "Being Banned." *Top of the News* 41,3 (Spring 1985): 248-255.

Klein discusses censorship and an example of a court case on a banned book.

———. "Some Thoughts on Censorship: An Author Symposium." *Top of the News* 39,2 (Winter 1983): 137-153.

Klein discusses her interviews with various authors, including Brancato, Blume, Scoppettone, Rees, and Miles, and their views on censorship.

Phy, Allene Stuart. *Presenting Norma Klein*. Boston: Twayne, 1988. A critical study of Klein's writing.

Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 38 (September 1984): 8.

Gives a synopsis of the novel with favorable comments, noting the novel was candid and sophisticated.

Review. *English Journal* 74 (February 1985): 101. This reviewer gives a very unfavorable review of the work, citing the book as "distasteful and demeaning to boys."

Review. *School Library Journal* 30 (May 1984): 90. The reviewer feels that the author is only touching upon topics that are vogue for the times and really does not deal with any of them in an insightful way.

Review. *Wilson Library Bulletin* 59 (February 1985): 407. The reviewer gives a synopsis of the novel with favorable comments. The book is described as being witty and fastpaced.

Related Titles

Another novel by Klein, *It's Not What You Expect* (1973), tells the story of fourteen-year-old twins, Oliver and Carla, who must cope with their father's absence when he leaves to go to New York City to write a book. *Going Backwards* (1986) and *No More Saturday Nights* (1988) are also similar Klein titles, for both portray stories of male adolescents with life-changing problems.



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