

The Arizona Kid Short Guide

The Arizona Kid by Ron Koertge

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Overview

In *The Arizona Kid*, Koertge covers a great deal of ground. He looks at falling in love, homosexuality, safe sex, honesty, self-esteem, horse training, and respect with both seriousness and an engaging sense of humor. Events in the novel happen quickly and are supplemented by the internal commentary of the narrator. Koertge draws the reader into Billy's world, because part of Billy—his insecurities, his need to find a niche, and his confusion about life in general—exists in each of us.

The reader extends an understanding sympathy towards Billy and those around him because he and the other main characters in the story are wellrounded people, each with admirable and not-so-admirable qualities. '

The Arizona Kid is essentially a coming-of-age story and in some ways a fantasy in which a young person has an adventure away from the prying eyes of parents. Billy arrives in Tucson hoping the summer will cure all of his problems—especially his shortness and his virginity—and will send him home a new, confident person. Over the course of the summer, his life does change, but not entirely in the way Billy hopes. While he does not grow any taller, he does lose his virginity and falls in love at the same time, thus removing one set of perceived problems while creating another, having to leave his first love at summer's end.

His relationship with Wes also becomes stronger and he understands more that his own fears pale in comparison with those his uncle faces.

Overall, Billy grows up in a realistic way during the summer. While he does not necessarily become the most confident person in the world, he gains a better sense of himself and finds that, with practice, he can handle most situations in an adult fashion.

About the Author

Ron Koertge was born on April 22, 1940 in Olmsted, Illinois. He received his undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois in 1962 and his master's degree from the University of Arizona in 1965. That same year, he began teaching English at Pasadena City College in Pasadena, California, a position he still holds. Koertge says he "could always write a little . . . So I tried my hand at it, beginning with poetry and then trying adult novels before turning to Young Adult novels."

His list of published work is impressive, including several volumes of poetry as well as a textbook, but he has gained the most notice for his young adult books, all of which have received excellent reviews from such journals as Kirkus and the Horn Book, and four of which have been named "ALA Best Books for Young Adults."

Koertge writes about growing up with an humorous honesty not often found in young adult novels, and he combines this engaging style with discussions of more serious issues such as homosexuality and AIDS, facing a parent's sexuality, and the complexities that face friendships as people grow from child to adult. As he "has been fifteen just about my whole life," finding the right narrative voice for his characters did not present many problems, and in a talk at Simmons College in 1991, about *The Arizona Kid* and writing in general, Koertge spoke of how he created his characters' reactions. As an example of how a good writer can put himself or herself into virtually any situation, Koertge related how when *The Arizona Kid* was first published, he received letters from the gay community congratulating him on his portrayal of Wes, Billy's gay uncle, at least until he informed some of the correspondents that he is not gay and has been married for many years. After that, he said, some letter writers became somewhat hostile, insisting that as a heterosexual man, Koertge had no right to describe the gay community in his book. Koertge's response was that he used his imagination, as any good author would do in order to create believable characters and situations.

Setting

The story takes place in the present in Tucson, Arizona. Billy Kennedy has come from Bradleyville, Missouri to visit his Uncle Wes and work at a horse training facility for the summer.

Wes is gay, and, while Billy at first feels uncomfortable with this, he respects and loves his uncle, moving from feeling embarrassed about being self-conscious about Wes's sexual orientation to understanding and accepting it. Wes's extremely clean and tasteful apartment contrasts sharply with the stable where Billy works. There, things are in a state of disrepair, but Billy soon discovers that the ramshackle surroundings house a good trainer who cares as much about the horses he trains as he does about his various toupees. Over the course of the summer, Billy learns a great deal about horses, makes some friends, falls in love, and grows to respect himself and his abilities much more.

Social Sensitivity

Koertge touches on several issues that may be of concern to some readers, including homosexuality, AIDS, and premarital sex. While some may find his treatment of these issues somewhat cavalier, he actually handles them with great sensitivity, including them in the novel as part of the story, not drawing attention to them by making them seem out of the ordinary.

In some respects, Wes fits the stereotype of a gay man. He runs a successful jewelry store, wears designer clothes, and maintains an exquisitely designed and clean home, but he is also much more than that. Koertge portrays Wes as a person who happens to be gay, not as a "gay man." While the gay community and its issues take up a great deal of his energy and time, they are just one part of his life. As he explains to Billy, "My dentist isn't gay, my accountant isn't gay, and I'd never go to a doctor who graduated last in his class just because he happened to look cute in a stethoscope." Wes's sense of humor, his compassion, and his business sense are just as much a part of him as is being gay, and through him Koertge encourages the reader to see the person as a whole, not to categorize someone for one aspect of a personality.

Koertge also does an excellent job of including the dangers of AIDS in the novel without sounding preachy or maudlin. Wes works one night a week at an AIDS hotline and shares his fears with Billy about AIDS. His first AIDS test came back negative, but he still must take another one. As he tells Billy, "I still won't know for two months." Basic information about how the virus can be spread appears in one or two places, but as they are in the middle of conversations between Wes and Billy, they do not sound forced. In addition, two of Wes's friends have contracted the virus that causes AIDS.

One serves as a role model for the community. He is strong and muscular, takes good care of himself, and will not allow himself to give up. The other is very ill when Billy meets him and dies about half-way through the book.

Other novels with gay characters either choose to ignore AIDS as a topic or concentrate on it to the point of forgetting that there are other parts to life.

Koertge mixes the two and provides a humorous and human look at one person's life.

While some readers may take exception to Koertge's glimpse at the gay community's life and concerns, others may disagree with his portrayal of adolescent sexuality. There are many teenagers who decide to wait until marriage before having sex, but just as many choose to have sex early, often with many partners and often unprotected and uninformed of the dangers of sexually transmitted disease. Billy is not one of these teenagers. He comes to Tucson an admitted virgin and learns from Wes very early in the relationship with Cara Mae about the need for protection. Koertge handles the scenes between Billy and Cara Mae with honesty, sensitivity, and humor.



After making love with Cara Mae for the first time, Billy says that "the thing I liked most, though, wasn't the sex. . .

I liked waking up . . . and having [Cara Mae] beside me." Koertge emphasizes the emotions and closeness Billy feels, not the physical act.



Literary Qualities

While some symbolism appears in *The Arizona Kid*—Fletcher and Grif obviously represent the unscrupulous side of horse racing, and Billy chooses a cream colored hat over one that makes him "look like Black Bart"—the main literary qualities are humor and narrative style. Koertge uses humor in ways that appear to downplay the seriousness of some of the issues, but actually works to emphasize them. To Billy, 2762 *The Arizona Kid* Cara Mae's initial treatment of him is very important: She ignores him. Lew tries to insist that as he has more experience with women than Billy, and that he knows that Cara Mae really likes Billy. When she then brushes by Billy without even glancing at him, Billy responds by saying "according to your theory, she doesn't just like me. She loves me and wants to have my baby."

The humor here hides the hurt he feels of Lew's making fun of his feelings.

Humor also helps Billy talk about certain intimate problems. By joking about condoms—"We've barely held hands . . . Now you'll probably want to give me a mitten"—Billy talks around the discomfort he feels about discussing the subject. Wes also engages in this type of talk to cover his feelings. When Billy discovers Wes will be going out to the bars after dinner, he tries to warn him to be careful, but Wes simply banters with him about being treated like a teen-ager. While all the joking can be seen as lighthearted, it masks the deeper meanings of the characters' conversations.

By using Billy as the narrator, Koertge gives the novel an immediacy and honesty that will engage the reader. As a newcomer to Arizona, homosexuality, horse racing, and falling in love, Billy's thoughts and impressions feel new.

The reader experiences each new feeling and situation with Billy, understanding his embarrassment when Wes tells him AIDS cannot be passed by a handshake, his fear when Lew's father jumps out in full combat gear the first time, his anxiety when he first approaches Cara Mae for a date, and his sadness when Moon's Medicine dies.

This first-person form of narration keeps the reader close to Billy and directly in the action of the story.



Themes and Characters

The Arizona Kid does not sport a large cast of characters, but those who do appear play a sizable role in the action of the story, like an ensemble. The main characters are Billy, Cara Mae, Lew, and Wes, with Abby and other adults in the novel taking on important but more minor roles.

As narrator, Billy captures the largest role in the book and, by default, becomes the character the reader knows the best. His early self-description—"Billy Kennedy, the shrimp.

Good grades, good outside shooter, fair shortstop, sense of humor, okay guy in general. Virgin"—indicates what he feels are his most notable qualities. In seeing only these qualities, Billy sells himself short, resembling many adolescents who do not believe in themselves.

In reality, Billy shows himself to be honest, giving, intelligent, and caring enough not to allow his hormones to run away with him. His bravery shows itself in a few instances. He stands up to Fletcher and Grif when the two sneak in to The Dark Mirage's paddock the night before the race, and he offers to stay with Wes when Wes is harassed after a healing service. His intelligence and caring nature show themselves around Cara Mae; he is smart enough not to have sex with her without using a condom and caring enough to explain to her what he finds attractive about her, making her feel special. Overall, Billy represents many teen-agers. His lack of confidence and self-deprecating sense of humor do little to mask the wonderful person underneath the frightened facade.

If the reader sees The Arizona Kid as a fantasy, then Wes represents the whimsical, almost magical, uncle who manages to suspend parental rules to allow the protagonist to have an adventure. Indeed, Wes provides Billy with the job at Jack Ferguson's, a pair of mirrored sunglasses, Tony Lamas boots, the use of a van—Billy is not allowed to drive the family car until he is eighteen—and as much freedom as he wants. Wes is funny, interesting, knowledgeable, and willing to share all these qualities with Billy, but he also possesses a deeper side. The AIDS epidemic has forced him to consider his own mortality and that of the people for whom he cares. He tells Billy that working on the hotline helps—he no longer tries to deal with his fear "by prowling around the men's department at Goldwater's with a charge card in both hands"—but hearing of a friend's death still frightens and saddens him.

Cara Mae is best described by those around her. Billy finds her very pretty and also very passionate, meaning she has "big feelings" about things. When she loses her bet on Moon's Medicine, nothing Billy can say makes her feel any better. Lew thinks she is a good rider but "a handful." Cara Mae herself thinks she is a "real nutcase." Cara Mae does have some problems. She suffers from very low self-esteem and turns to drugs and alcohol to escape the depression she feels. She is also fiercely loyal and has a very good eye for horses. When French Bred first runs, it is Cara Mae who sees the imperfections in the horse and gives confidence to the others that The Dark Mirage can



win the race. In spite of her problems, Cara Mae knows what she wants out of life and works very hard to get it.

Lew and Billy seem like a strange combination—where Billy is short and insecure, Lew is "six feet tall [with] paratrooper boots, fatigue pants, ripped T-shirt, [and] an earring with a skull on it"—but actually become fairly good friends. Where Billy comes from a middle-class home where his parents care about one another and intend for him to go to college, Lew comes from a somewhat dysfunctional family. His father is a research lawyer for classaction lawsuits who has a penchant for the paramilitary survivalist movement.

His mother is nearly a nonexistent person who hides from, and in, her husband's shadow by smoking marijuana, shutting herself off with a personal stereo set, and avoiding the world. Lew himself believes the world will someday end and wants to be ready for it, but he seems to have no other goals aside from that—during the course of the novel, he finds out that he will not graduate from high school. He enjoys dating Abby and thereby annoying her father. Lew and Billy complement one another.

In this novel, Koertge writes mainly about the theme of relationships, dealing with how the characters interconnect with each other, especially parent/child and boy/girl relationships. Although they do not physically appear in the novel, it is obvious from phone conversations and Billy's thoughts that he and his parents have an open, understanding relationship.

They talk to one another, and Billy's parents instill in him values such as finishing jobs he starts, honesty, and standing up for what is right. In addition, they allow him to see how their relationship works. In their first phone conversation, Billy realizes "they could get along fine on their own." He also comments on how much he misses his parents and that he does not want to disappoint them. From the depictions shown, it would be hard to imagine either Lew or Cara Mae feeling that way towards their families. Lew refers to his father as Edgar, his first name, and only seems to pay attention to him when he needs money, and he never mentions his mother at all. Cara Mae tells Billy that her mother left the family when Cara Mae was a child, telling her she would understand when older, and she only introduces Billy to her father at the end of the novel.

The boy/girl relationships are equally as varied. Lew and Abby both appear to be using their relationship to rebel from their parents. Lew describes Abby's father as an "old man who owns the best horses on the grounds and votes Republican with his eyes closed. It makes him nuts that Abby goes out with me." As annoyed about Lew as Abby's father may be, his wealth and need for control are qualities that would probably bother Lew's father as well. Aside from this need to break away from their parents, Lew and Abby seem to have nothing in common; Lew even admits to Billy that he and Abby do not love each other.

Interestingly enough Billy and Cara Mae also do not seem to share much except a love of horses, but their relationship is different. There is a tenderness apparent between

them that Lew and Abby do not share. They genuinely care for one another and feel pain at the thought of separating.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Billy faint when he gets off the train in Tucson?
2. Koertge presents Wes as nearly perfect. His clothing and taste appear impeccable, he is a successful businessman, he commits himself to worthy social causes, and he is kind, compassionate, and giving. Is Wes too good to be true? Is he a believable character?
3. Billy and Abby obviously come from different levels of society than Cara Mae and Lew. What brings these couples together? Given their social differences and their ages, would either relationship last?
4. Why does Abby enjoy hearing about gloomy prophecies of the future?
5. Koertge handles the sex scenes in *The Arizona Kid* in a discreet and sensitive manner, concentrating more on Billy's emotions than the physical act, but are these scenes necessary to the story? Would the novel be as effective without them?
6. Should Billy and the others have contacted the police when Fletcher and Grif tried to drug *The Dark Mirage*?

Was the situation handled believably?

7. Why did Cara Mae's mother leave?
8. Several different times in the novel Cara Mae smokes marijuana.

While Billy privately fears "starting out with grass and ending up ten days later on heroin," he never asks Cara Mae not to smoke or even mentions that it bothers him. By not having Billy speak up, is Koertge tacitly condoning drug use?

9. On more than one occasion Billy and Wes discuss safe sex. Does it appear that Koertge is preaching about the subject?
10. Cara Mae's behavior is erratic throughout the book. At one point she tells Billy that she dreads waking up "because it's just even money you're gonna be depressed." Is she exhibiting usual adolescent mood swings or could she have a deeper problem?
11. Did Koertge need to include the scene where Wes is threatened by the drunken hecklers? Does it add anything to the plot?
12. Do you think Billy will fall in love "a thousand times" during his life?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Lowry Pei's *Family Resemblances* (1986) tells the story of Karen, a fifteen-year-old girl who spends the summer with her aunt and begins a relationship that she must leave just as she realizes she is in love. Compare Pei's book with *The Arizona Kid*. How are Karen and Billy alike? How are they different? Are their relationships with Augusta and Wes similar? What changes from a boy's perspective to a girl's?

2. AIDS is openly discussed in *The Arizona Kid*—Billy asks Wes if he has been tested for the virus and Wes serves as a counselor on an AIDS hotline.

How was AIDS first discovered in the United States? What is currently being done to curb the spread of this deadly virus? What more could be done? Look at Randy Schilt's book *And the Band Played On*.

3. Lew's father belongs to a survivalist organization and always tries to outsmart his son with surprise attacks or "kidnappings" to the desert. What do these organizations believe in?

What are their goals?

4. When Jack Ferguson races *The Dark Mirage* against French Bred, Billy asks if her owner will watch the race.

Jack replies, "She's just a figure on a tax sheet somewhere." In what way is a racehorse a tax deduction? Given the care and training time involved is this a good investment?

5. Imagine you are teaching a class in which *The Arizona Kid* appears on the syllabus. Soon after the class starts, you receive a letter from the parents of several of your students protesting the inclusion of the novel because it discusses drug use, premarital sex, gambling, and homosexuality. Write a response to these parents justifying retaining the book.

6. For various reasons, several communities across the country are currently trying to pass ordinances prohibiting gay rights legislation or the passage of civil rights protection for homosexuals. Where are these communities? What are their reasons for trying to enact these ordinances? Are laws providing protection necessary?



For Further Reference

Bush, Margaret. "Mariposa Blues."

Horn Book (July/August, 1991): 464.

In this review, Bush provides a brief discussion of Koertge's book and its themes of girl/boy friendship and father/son conflict that occur around the Mariposa racecourse.

"Ron Koertge." Boston: Little, Brown, 1992. Koertge's publishers have put together this informative pamphlet that combines an interview with the author with a brief discussion of his young adult novels.

Vasilakis, Nancy. "The Boy in the Moon." Horn Book (July/August, 1990): 462. Vasilakis compares this book to others written by Koertge, including *The Arizona Kid* and writes that the combination of frank descriptions of "teenage male sexuality . . . together with . . . large doses of humor" and Koertge's ability to take teen-age problems as seriously as teen-agers do, "raises this teenage problem novel above the norm."

———. "The Harmony Arms." Horn Book (July/August, 1992): 727-728.

Vasilakis provides a short review of Koertge's latest work along with a brief commentary about the plot and various characters.

Related Titles

While there are no directly related titles or adaptations of *The Arizona Kid*, Koertge's other young adult novels are cast from a similar mold. All deal with an adolescent boy falling in love for the first time and having to take stock of a new situation in his life. In *Where the Kissing Never Stops*, it is the death of a father combined with a mother's new career as an exotic dancer; *The Boy in the Moon* looks at the complexities of boy-girl friendships; *Mariposa Blues* sees a young man standing up to his father about ideas for training horses; and *The Harmony Arms* shows what Los Angeles and a hand-puppet-toting father look like to a boy from small-town Missouri. While these books do not form a series, they are connected by Koertge's delightful sense of humor and knowledge of adolescent concerns.



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