# Baby Be-Bop Short Guide

## Baby Be-Bop by Francesca Lia Block

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# Overview

In Baby Be-Bop, sixteen-year-old Dirk McDonald details his difficulties in coming to terms with his homosexuality. Readers first meet Dirk in the novel Weetzie Bat, when he and his lover, Duck, become central cogs in Weetzie's eccentric and loving extended family. In Baby Be-Bop, Block goes back to explore Dirk's childhood and early adolescence before he meets both Weetzie and Duck. As the novel opens, Dirk's idyllic childhood, which he spends living with his grandmother Fifi, ends when he enters adolescence and recognizes homosexual feelings. As Dirk realizes that his fantasies contrast with those of his heterosexual peers, he finds it difficult to voice his desires even to those he loves.

When Dirk is painfully rebuffed by his first lover, he changes his appearance and joins the punk scene where he encounters rough violence and hatred. Unlike Weetzie Bat, where homosexual themes are significant but subdued, in Baby Be-Bop Dirk's experiences as he comes to accept his homosexuality form the very core of the novel. Throughout the 1990s, a number of adolescent novels have described homosexual self-loathing and a struggle to fit in, but few have offered such a frank discussion of those areas and the sometimes violent reactions of others to those who are gay. Ultimately, by using the magic lamp given to him by his grandmother, Dirk discovers his parents' past, which helps him find a path of love and acceptance.

# About the Author

Francesca Lia Block was born on December 3,1962, in Hollywood, California, to Irving and Gilda Block. Francesca knew from an early age that she wanted to be a writer. In an interview with Shannon Maughan, she explains her early development: "I loved poetry. I kept journals and took writing classes. And I read a lot." Her parents, an accomplished painter and a poet, encouraged this development. Block practiced her writing and painting as a child. In her adolescent years she wrote poems and stories. When she reached high school, she and her friends began exploring Los Angeles. In the process she saw both the "fairy-tale magic" of the downtown and the darker, "adult" side of the city. These Los Angeles sights and sounds filtered through a teen's perception reappear often in her young adult novels.

Shortly before Block left for college at the University of California at Berkeley, her father was diagnosed with cancer. Her father's illness and her first-year homesickness fueled her writing and helped her to reconnect with her adolescence in Los Angeles. This "respite from my difficult courses in college" became her first adolescent novel, Weetzie Bat, in which Block recreated landmarks she and her friends had frequented as adolescents. She also freely drew upon high school and college experiences of the punk music scene. In an essay for Something about the Author Autobiography Series, Block reaffirms the close ties between music and her style of writing. She wants her readers to "react the way they do to music—sweating, dancing, crying."

Weetzie Bat was eagerly endorsed for publication by a leading editor and author of children's books, Charlotte Zolotow, at HarperCollins. This was an almost mystical connection for Block because Zolotow had been one of her favorite authors as a child.

Following the success of Weetzie Bat, Block delved into a series of novels focusing on characters introduced in that first book. She also has published two novels for adults. In 1998, the novels centering on Weetzie and her extended family were gathered into one volume, Dangerous Angels: The Weetzie Bat Books.

Although Block's novels are not autobiographical, Block tells interviewer Brangien Davis that, since childhood, writing has helped her make connections with others: "I felt like an only child, kind of isolated, and my companion was writing. I think I was yearning for that sense of community—a really safe, loving community.... I write about what's going on in my life, what is urgent and needs to be expressed. I keep moving through what I'm feeling at the time. My daily life, my friends inspire me and I feel confident enough to put it down as it's happening." In Baby Be-Bop, Dirk's difficulties in accepting his homosexuality were inspired by observing the pain of friends in similar situations.

Block's reading both as a child and as an adult helped her develop as a writer. Block states she was "hugely influenced" by reading magical realism, "by the way those writers combined the magic and the real...

the same way you have the dark and the light of life." Concrete, imagistic poems by H. D. and Emily Dickinson were also an influence that then "all got mixed in with the myths and the fairy tales and the punk subculture that I was interested in and the music I was listening to." Even the mystical elements of her stories are grounded in experience: "When my dad died I had a series of really magical things that happened sort of related to his spirit." Block recognizes she could easily have dedicated her life to following a spiritual path, but she tells Davis that "there's always part of me that keeps away from that—stays on this side of the line in order to remain in this world and write about what's in my imagination. So it becomes more metaphorical, I guess—the witches and the fairies and the genies are aspects of the self more than realities."

Block did not intentionally start out to write for young adults, but she is now happy to be so labeled. "I have been fortunate because I get to have a relationship with young people—they are so inspiring."

Still, she is skeptical about being categorized. Writing is "all about breaking down boundaries between people and finding that we all have children inside us, and children have a lot of sophistication, too."

Her advice to budding writers in the Davis interview is to listen to themselves and face their fears. "If you go to that really personal, private place that you kind of want to hide, and you share it, you find there is a connection." Later she states: "I don't set out to make an example for somebody, I just want to tell a story, and it's informed with beliefs that I naturally have."

The themes of her books resonate with her daily life, which is guided by a belief "in the healing power of love and creative expression in the face of fear." Yet in promoting the values she wants to live by, Block is careful not to be didactic. Her warmth toward her readers is clear, and she avoids speaking down to them. Inspired by her characters' discoveries, she wants readers to feel confident enough to tell their own stories.

# Setting

The centerpiece for all Block's novels is Los Angeles, a super-American world of sunshine, chaotic change, and Hollywood magic. In this fast-moving society built upon almost instant obsolescence, social problems persist. The luscious mix of cultures and the magic of the entertainment industry contrast with the problems of AIDS, drug abuse, and neo-Nazi violence. Those who have not found a niche, and those not in the spotlight, are painfully aware of their alienation. The result, for Dirk, is a profound sense of loneliness. In the Dangerous Angels series, the lonely and alienated characters band together in a makeshift, unorthodox family amidst ornate architecture designed to look old, cuisine from varied ethnic origins, and tacky consumer fluff. As they support each other, they feel whole and loved. Block's novels mix the beauty and magic of Los Angeles with a depiction of the superficial ugliness of street culture.

Baby Be-Bop tells the story of Dirk before he meets Weetzie and Duck. The time frame of the novel begins with Dirk's childhood and ends just before Weetzie and Duck enter his life. The information presented broadens and deepens the story told in Weetzie Bat. In Baby Be-Bop, readers learn the history of the lamp which Grandmother Fifi owns and also gain historical perspective on Dirk and Duck.

In Baby Be-Bop,Dirk is seen first exploring the neighborhood of backyards, creeks, and familiar paths in the contained and intimate world of childhood. Yet beyond Dirk's life with his loving grandmother is a modern world where parents are absent and the sordid distractions of the disjointed consumer/car culture of southern California are known even to children. Dirk's innocence flourishes amidst the natural exuberance of his well-traveled neighborhood.

When he enters his adolescence, there is beauty in his first infatuation, and his first homosexual crush is described with lush garden imagery that is reminiscent of his idyllic childhood. "The air smelled like lemon Pledge, sweet jasmine and mock orange. .. . Morning glories glowed neon purple, twining among the pink oleander."

In Block's novels, the descriptions of setting nearly always reflect the inner state of individual characters. As a child in Fifi's magical garden filled with butterflies, Dirk feels self-sufficient and happy. "[He] could stand naked in a crowd of [butterflies] and be completely covered." Years later, painfully aware of his outsider status, he tries to deny his homosexuality. Eventually this leads him into the sometimes ugly, rootless world outside the neighborhood. The highway becomes his path away from himself.

"The freeway made him think of loss instead of hope, stretching out under a hovering orangish buzz of night air, not seeming to lead anywhere.... He drove over the city's shoulders tattooed with wandering, hungry children and used car lots, drove past hanging traffic light earrings into beery breath mist, up and up above the city, trying to shed it like a skin."

The outward physical world reflects the colorful excitement of Los Angeles while also mirroring the desolate interior world of lonely adolescents searching for love and acceptance in a world where they do not fit.

In the punk scene Dirk deliberately seeks "a wild enough animal safari that his own beastliness might go unnoticed." When Dirk's great-grandmother, grandfather, and mother and father appear as visions from the lamp, their stories help him to reconstruct a history and an interior family landscape which helps him put his isolated present in perspective.

# Social Sensitivity

Block's honest and sometimes graphic treatment of homosexuality, AIDS, child abuse, and skinhead culture has made her works controversial; on the flip side this openness in presenting characters who defy social norms makes the books groundbreaking. Readers' reactions are rarely neutral. In Weetzie Bat, the leading character sleeps with two gay men when she wants a baby. In The Hanged Man, a young man deals with sexual abuse, which is sometimes graphically described. In Baby Be-Bop, Dirk has fantasies about naked fathers and homosexual relationships. Block tackles very real social problems, yet she does not allow these problems to permanently overwhelm characters. Neither Dirk nor Weetzie remains scarred by their troubles. In each novel characters learn also that goodness and beauty can arise from struggle.

Paradoxically, Block has never directly targeted young adults as an audience.

She notes in an interview with Shannon Maughan that she has "spent a lot of time worrying about my books being in the YA category, but I've decided to let someone else take on that cause." Unlike some adolescent authors (often prompted by editors) who research the norms of the genre and "follow the rules," Block tells her stories as they come to her. As a result she has avoided the didacticism and subtle authorial censorship from which other adolescent novels sometimes suffer.

Although neither Baby Be-Bop nor the other novels in the Dangerous Angels series deliberately sets out to shock, the characters and themes reveal issues, themes, language, and music in modern youth culture that many adults would prefer to believe do not exist. By writing about concerns such as Dirk's homosexuality Block invites the forces of censorship. Baby Be-Bop has joined the ranks of banned books, like several of her other novels. In the Maughan interview Block responds to her critics: "If my books create controversy and are challenged, I'm honored my books are a part of that. There are lots of great books that have been banned." Adolescents are quick to realize when adults hold back information from them. They also recognize an author who respects their desire for the "right" knowledge at the right time.

Part of the appeal of Baby Be-Bop and the other books in the Dangerous Angels series is the juxtaposition of elements of contemporary culture. Promiscuous sex, hatred, violence, drug abuse, and profane language are realities in this culture, and thus, appear in Baby Be-Bop. But these elements are tempered with acts of love. Although Dirk struggles and occasionally dips into selfdestructive behavior, the overall movement in the book is toward emotional and physical health. For adolescents too familiar with both sugar-coated modern fables and graphic morality lessons, Dirk's story is neither too sweet nor too sour.

Telling stories, Block seems to argue, demands telling the whole story in all of its related beauty and ugliness. When Dirk picks up the golden lamp he finds, "It was heavy with stories of love. It was light with stories of love. It could sink to the bottom of the sea, touch the core of the earth with the weight of love. It could soar into the clouds like a

creature with wings." To Block no story remains at the bottom of the sea, or in the clouds. In Baby Be-Bop the golden lamp is the "story-making machinery," to which the novel suggests all people have access.

The genie suggests the source of the muse can come from many sources. "You can call me by a lot of names. Stranger. Devil. Angel. Spirit. Guardian." Block's insistence that the creative impulse is a natural and necessary outlet for all healthy humans is appealing to adolescents who have not yet come to believe that only those deemed brilliant may produce art. When Dirk thinks to himself, "Each of us has a family tree full of stories inside of us... . Each of us has a story blossoming out of us," he reaches out to others, who like himself, have not yet fully discovered a role, a niche, a voice.

Baby Be-Bop also appeals to adolescents enmeshed in pop culture. Dirk and other characters have grown up awash in a swirling, changing culture that crosses genres.

When Dirk needs to run from his pain, he takes to the highway, riding a motorcycle into the wild night. In the darkness of his despair, dream, nightmare, and reality come together in cinematic horror. His nightmares are mixtures of communal and personal memory: "Naked fathers in the shower, gas to make their lungs explode. Dying fathers as the train kept on going kept going. To hell." The Holocaust and his homosexual desires intermingle with references to James Dean and other actors and musicians. Dirk describes his mother, Just Silver, as someone straight out of the movies: "She was Edie Sedgewick and Twiggy and Bowie and like his father she was James Dean too." Throughout Baby Be-Bop, the music, art, and culture of the 1960s mingles with the frenetic, "in your face" starkness of the 1980s punk scene. Block's ability to borrow meaning freely from different times, different genres will come naturally to adolescents who have grown up on movies, channel surfing, and music that defies labels.

Finding a supportive community is not easy for many adolescents who grow up without both parents or the luxury of an extended family. In Baby Be-Bop, Dirk discovers the horror of trying to live solely within himself. Equally horrifying is the outer world of masks, violence, and child abuse when adolescents live without support. Block's characters almost never have a traditional family to return to. Instead, they must often create new "families" from the sources available. Dirk's father counsels him to fight his fear and to "find" a larger family in the culture itself. "Do you know about the Greek gods, probably Walt Whitman—first beat father, Oscar Wilde, Ginsberg, even, maybe your number one hero?" Those homosexual storytellers, his father suggests, are part of his spiritual family. Listening to others' stories (and then learning to tell his own) will start the process of building his own living, nurturing community.

For adolescents who see no hope, Block counsels patience. Dirk's last vision from the lamp is of the city itself and the surrounding countryside. Finally he sees his future love, Duck. He sees Duck's family and learns of his history. Like Dirk, Duck has felt that being gay is wrong. Like Dirk, Duck has tried to be something he was not.

Like Dirk, he has lost his father. Like Dirk, he has secret dreams which seem impossible. "Duck wanted a boyfriend he could surf with, someone he could tell his

secret to, someone who had the same secret inside. He wanted to reach inside his lover and touch that lonely secret with his own."

Dirk learns that he is not alone, that love is possible. What he cannot readily see in the present may be a real possibility in the future.

Baby Be-Bop documents the exhilarating freedom adolescents can feel as they venture into the adult world, even as this freedom is tempered by new realities. The selfimage that seems so secure with parents and peers often disappears outside the familiar world. When Duck leaves his family, "The soaring free feeling was mixed with a sadness as Duck realized how alone he really was now." Duck worries about his future. "By the time I find you I may be so old and messed up you won't even recognize me. Maybe this is what I deserve for wanting to find a man. Looking for you always, never finding you, poisoning myself." Ultimately, both Dirk and Duck will be able to reaffirm their childhood memories, and reconnect with their families and their dreams. In true fairy-tale fashion the genie in the lamp lets Dirk know that "When Duck sees his love he will know that the rest of his story has begun... . The sweetness and openness they were born with will come back when they see each in the swimming, surfing lights."

The power of creation is the ability to create a story out of lives that have been bruised by experience. As Baby Be-Bop demonstrates, loneliness and alienation breed lack of understanding, hatred, and further alienation. Dirk learns that the way out of this vicious spiral is to face fear, hear the muse, and trust in the validity of his own story. "Stories are like genies, Dirk thought.

They can carry us into and through our sorrows. Sometimes they burn, sometimes they dance, sometimes they weep, sometimes they sing. Like genies, everyone has one. Like genies, sometimes we forget that we do." This message will seem dangerous to those adults who fight against trusting the individual stories that adolescents might concoct, and those who wish adolescents to remain inexperienced. Yet Block knows well that tentative attempts at making sense of the world are necessary, that mistakes will be made. Like Dirk, many adolescents will have to face false loves and deal with selfhatred before true love can come alive.

Ultimately, love, acceptance, and experience can reveal to adolescents the beauty that already exists in the world around them.

# Literary Qualities

Block's mixing of sensual prose with a sometimes harsh reality produces a lyrical fairy-tale-like story solidly grounded in real life. This is no accident, as Block notes that "I've always loved fairy tales.... Sometimes I'll take something directly, a myth or a fairy tale—and use it as a structure."

Cinema-like imagery pervades Baby Be-Bop and the other books in the Dangerous Angels series. In the Davis interview Block states that when she is composing "it's almost like I'm watching a film—I describe what I'm seeing in my mind—it's all very visual and in color as I'm writing it."

Magical realism with its mix of light and dark and myth and modern culture are evident throughout these works. Depictions of stark reality (the death of Dirk's grandfather, the violence in the punk scene, the rejection by his first love) are juxtaposed with images of beauty. Block presents a cyclical world where nothing is easy or given. Fear, pain, and loneliness diminish the power to create, finding a moment of beauty does not guarantee that enlightenment will stay. Moments of ecstatic enlightenment will be followed by a stark crisis that must be faced.

Myriad references to fairy tales, movies, and music, often placed closely together, present a sense of collage more attuned to the senses than the intellect. Mixing spiritual references (such as Kali), with 1960s mysticism, to colors and sensual description provide a sense of richness contrasting with the stark problems the characters often face.

References to actual events, such as the death of Martin Luther King Jr., help place the reader in a particularly American cultural continuum. Block loves to show the diversity of life in Los Angeles, the headquarters of media culture, overwhelming her characters with aromas, sights, and sounds. This surreal and lush imagery illuminates the characters' options in this postmodern, multicultural society. Although few adolescents will face the same problems Dirk and other characters deal with, most readers recognize that the yin/yang/ beautiful/ugly/light/dark plot movement is similar to the rhythm of young adult life.

Implied in the very structure of the narrative is the inability to separate these realities.

By adding magical and mythic elements to the plot, combined with lush surreal imagery, Block is able to mimic intense interior states. All the stories told by Dirk's family in some way reveal the struggles of the artist to live the creative life. The lives of characters are metaphors for the creative process. Read on one level, Block's novels reveal characters dealing with real world problems. On another level, the plot lines serve as road maps to Block's creative world.

# Themes and Characters

Baby Be-Bop traces the growing awareness for Dirk of what it means to be homosexual in the contemporary United States culture. Significant themes appear in Baby Be-Bop that also appear in other books in the Dangerous Angels series, including the difficulty of retaining artistic sensitivity in a harsh world and the power of love to build a community.

"Dirk knew there was something about this train that wasn't right." As Dirk enters adolescence one-fourth of the way into the book, he finds himself alone in chaotic territory. Like many adolescents, Dirk finds it difficult to align his ideals with everyday interactions. "He wanted to be strong and love someone who was strong; he wanted to meet any gaze, to laugh under the brightest sunlight and never hide." Instead he finds himself locked in a world of secrets, acting roles to avoid the contempt others would feel if he revealed the truth of who he was. He yearns to explain the source of these feelings of difference. But what would he say? And to whom? "And why did he have to tell? Boys who loved girls didn't have to sit their mothers down and say, 'Mom, I love girls. I want to sleep with them.'"

The inner bleakness coexists with the vivid outer California world, reemphasizing Block's awareness that adolescence is a time of contrast. She consistently avoids portraying characters as dwelling in simple emotional worlds of either utter despair or uncomplicated happiness. One is bound to blend into the other. Dirk's first full-blown infatuation with his friend Pup seems idyllic at first. In their love Dirk and Pup are "safe in their innocence, little Peter Pans never growing old, never having to explain." But often adolescents do not have the experience or the language to explain the realities they confront. Neither Dirk nor Pup can explain what it is they feel; soon enough both know well the horror others would express if they knew the truth. Pup describes a Neanderthal date his mother once brought home who spouted epithets against homosexuals, and Dirk soon learns the lengths to which Pup, like other adolescents, will go to protect fragile secrets. When Pup dates girls in an attempt to play a "normal" role, Dirk feels the bitterness of love denied.

As an adolescent, Dirk faces conflicting impulses. Like many adolescents, Dirk wishes to avoid further pain, yet he still yearns to explore and break new ground. His first fearful impulse is to don a recognizable mask. He cuts his hair into a Mohawk and dresses like a punker, feeling that this new persona prevents others from seeing his fragile, true self. Running headlong into the punk culture of pounding music by groups with names like Fear, Dirk finds a world of drugs and alcohol, swastikas and fights, smoke and chaos. While Dirk's escape has a distinctive southern California flavor, this cultivation of "adult" worldly experience is a familiar motif in adolescent behavior. Some rebel from tight family strictures, others from abuse, or others simply to hide the remnants of their childlike nature. In the club world, Dirk hides from his homosexuality and the harsh judgements of others.

In the world of Block's characters, however, magic also exists; it simply waits to be discovered and utilized. Indeed, Baby BeBop would be a stark, depressing story if Dirk remained in his aimless highway flight, but Block is not content simply to present a slice of life that leaves an adolescent awash in a climate of crisis. Magic for Dirk comes from the lamp that his grandmother gives him. The lamp provides a connection to the family that has disappeared from his life and serves as the means by which the holes in modern life can be repaired. When his great-grandmother Gazelle appears in a vision, her story of Fifi's development helps him begin his healing. She goes to the heart of his fears, telling him, "Any love that is love is right." For most adolescents acceptance is itself a magical elixir. For Dirk, Gazelle's promotion of love in all its manifestations demolishes fears which seem insurmountable. "Something in his body opened like a love letter," and Dirk learns that for generations in his family a magical and sensual happiness was fueled by passionate love built upon acceptance of differences.

In Block's novels the magic world of "childlike" beliefs remains vital in the "real" world of healthy adults. When Dirk hears about the courtship of Fifi and Derwood, a naturalist and magician, Derwood tells Fifi, "You remind me of the fairies I saw in the countryside when I was a boy." For these adults, fairies and all things magical are very real. Derwood and Fifi marry and move to a gingerbread house full of "flowering plants, butterflies, crickets, doves," much like the house in which one day Weetzie and Dirk and their newmade family will reside. In this enchanted house protected from the harshness of everyday life they conceive Dirk's father, Dirby.

Although magic in Baby Be-Bop is a reality, it does not ensure endless happiness.

Believing his newfound family history is a blueprint for what he can expect in his adult future, Dirk observes his family go to the heights and then plunge to the depths. Dirk's grandparents' harmonious love is disrupted by illness and death—yet out of the darkness fueled by his grandfather's death come the seeds of future happiness. Gazelle counsels Fifi to move to Los Angeles where there are "groves of orange trees... starlets in silk stockings driving colorful jalopies with leopards in the passenger seats, sunshine all the time." In a different Los Angeles, years later, Dirk will meet Weetzie and the love of his life, Duck. The roller-coaster world of happiness and despair Dirk hears in the family stories mirrors the experiences of adolescents, who often yo-yo between extremes.

The family stories also suggest that making dreams come true while living with others is not easy. Dirk learns that his father, Dirby, also found it difficult to move from childhood to adult responsibilities. "I felt more like a part of nature than like a boy... . I'd look at the stars in the sky or at trees and I'd want to be that. I worried Fifi.

She was always trying to get me to be normal—play with other kids, laugh more."

Dirby's experiences illustrate for Dirk the difficulties artists face in reconciling their need for creative expression with the "practical" expectations of the workaday culture. The difficulties of expressing his unique vision isolate Dirby from others: "I wrote poetry from the time I could write. That was the only way I could begin to express who I was but the

poems didn't make sense to my teachers." Finally, almost accidentally, Dirby finds an audience at a jazz/beat club where amid the marijuana and wine, his poetry makes wineglasses dance.

For Block, finding beauty and grace as a creative artist is a goal that reappears throughout the Dangerous Angels books. In Baby Be-Bop, freedom comes to those who are sensitive. But like relationships, this freedom is not permanent. Dirk learns from his mother, Just Silver, a model, a dancer, and an actress, that finding balance in all facets of life is necessary but never easy. She introduces Dirby to Ravi Shankar, incense, Siddhartha, and Kali, the dancing goddess.

Kali fits well into this narrative of finding balance between extremes. When she appears in the lamp, Just Silver explains to Dirk that Kali represents both the dance of life and the danger of death. She says, "In the East those things can go together."

Discovering someone to love helps to allay alienation and loneliness, but love itself is an evolving process that demands understanding of its workings. Finding love, Block suggests, unleashes powers that are difficult to contain. His father tells Dirk that "Instead of grounding me, my love sent me spinning even deeper into the center of loneliness that was the stars and the night and wind. I didn't feel that my love was anything to do with the planet I had been born on. I wanted to fly away with Just Silver." Despite the intensity of Dirk's parents' love, the contrast between their swirling creative spirituality and the difficulties of everyday living is difficult to reconcile for them. For his father, a talented, visionary musician, Dirk's birth presents an awesome responsibility. "How was I supposed to keep living this abstract way, trying to be like music from a horn, like a sweat, like the dark skin of night peeling back at dawn?"

In listening to his parents, Dirk realizes he must learn from his family history and grow beyond it. Recognizing how to fight his fears is the first step. His father's final message to Dirk is "I want you to fight.... I want you not to be afraid." Dirk learns that his parents, too sensitive and too attuned to powerful forces in the universe, were overwhelmed by the violence of their culture in "the year Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were killed." Dirk gains strength as he learns of their anguish. "Dirk thought of his parents on the precipice, wanting to sink into the cavern of night and wild coyote hills, away from the hammering headlines and screaming TVs and the death of fathers."

As the family storytelling ends, Dirk has learned that unashamedly revealing one's story to others is the first step to finding balance and health. Before his family appears, he feels "He had no story. And if he did no one would want to hear it... . So it would be better to have no story at all. It was better to be dead inside." He is not the first to feel this way. Even Gazelle ends her tale by telling Dirk, "I still didn't believe I had a story to tell." Because Dirk has listened attentively, she has found her story.

The message is that stories are there, for everyone, but to become real they need listeners who desire for stories to come alive.

Having heard the stories of his family, Dirk realizes that nothing will take away the harshness of the world, the difficulties of reconciling responsibilities with the beauty and swirl of creation. But telling one's story means reaching out to others and finding connections that can help. When Dirk's mother, "still dancing behind Dirby, all eyelashes and legs," appears at the end of the family storytelling saga, she says, "Tell us your story, Baby Be-Bop," which is the nickname Dirk had been given as a child. When Fifi dies and he sits alone in the quiet house, the family stories he has heard swirl like words in the wind. He retells the stories again, mixing them with his own newfound stories. Now Fifi, Gazelle, Derwood, Dirby, and Just Silver mix with the story of Pup Lambert and the horror of punk violence and his childhood experiences with butterflies. All his ancestors' stories now are his own.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Respond to this quotation from the genie in the lamp: "Do you know that only two things have been proven to help survivors of the Holocaust? Massage is one. Telling their story is another. Being touched and touching. Telling your story is touching. It sets you free."

2. How realistic do you find Dirk's childhood experiences?

3. Block moves often from "serious" scenes to "magical" scenes. What effect does this alternating between the concrete and the mythical have on you as a reader?

4. Block says in a recent interview that she identifies with the "feeling of being the outsider, and all those passionate feelings that get twisted up because there's just too much." How do people act when they feel alienated from others? How can we lessen this feeling of alienation?

5. Respond to this statement about stories. "Sometimes they burn, sometimes they dance, sometimes they weep, sometimes they sing." Talk about a story that burns or weeps or sings.

6. "[Stories] can carry us into and through our sorrows." How does this apply to Dirk's life? To yours?

7. Discuss how characters responded to homosexual feelings and behavior in the novel. What other groups often are distanced from the mainstream? Why?

8. Block uses magical realism as a guide in writing her books, blending the mystical with the real, the light with dark.

What examples of this can you find in the novel? Discuss times in your life when the serious and the comic existed side by side.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Locate and explain the cultural references which characters mention in the book.

2. Adapt a scene for filming Baby Be-Bop.

Explain how you would show the magical elements.

3. When Dirk hears his family's stories, he learns of their importance in his life.

Write about a family story that helps to explain who you are.

4. Dirk's father suggests that writers, musicians, and actors are vital cogs in his cultural family. List at least five public figures who would stand out as significant people in your extended "public" family. Explain why these writers, musicians, and actors fit into your life.

5. Collecting significant stories (from his family and from the larger culture) lets Dirk know he is not alone. List your most significant stories—from television, movies, family experiences, books, or public events. Write about why these stories have remained in your memory over time.

6. Note what "themes" or patterns run through several of your significant stories.

7. Write about some element of your personality, or a belief that you feel strongly about, that you believe that your parents or others would find difficult to accept.

8. Write about a time when you took on a role or developed an image in order to avoid a conflict.

9. Discuss the role of music in the development of who you are. What songs and what groups are important?

# For Further Reference

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ALAN Review, spring 1994, 60-65. Shows how Block's novels explore cultural differences and foster multicultural perspectives.

# Related Titles

Baby Be-Bop is the fifth novel in the Dangerous Angels series. Readers initially meet Dirk in the first novel, Weetzie Bat. As Weetzie's best friend, Dirk is a catalyst in establishing her unorthodox "family" of misfits, animals, and young children. When Dirk inherits Fifi's house, this becomes their home. In Weetzie Bat, Dirk meets his fated lover, Duck, and together they father Weetzie's child, Cherokee, after her lover, Secret Agent Lover Man, leaves the home to find himself. When Secret Agent Lover Man returns, all four help to raise Cherokee and Witch Baby, a child fathered by Secret Agent Lover Man. In Weetzie Bat, the reader learns briefly of Dirk's and Duck's struggles to come to terms with being gay. But overall, Weetzie Bat is primarily Weetzie's story. The subsequent books, Witch Baby, Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys, and Missing Angel Juan, tell the stories of the children in this household as they develop and face their own problems. Each eventually finds a lover and builds upon the community created by Weetzie and friends.

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