

Being with Henry Short Guide

Being with Henry by Martha Brooks

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Overview

In terms of its structure, *Being with Henry* resembles a quest tale in which a young boy is sent away from his home, is tested by the world, and then returns, having gained wisdom both from those individuals he encounters and from his experiences. But the work offers much more than this simple story line, for *Being with Henry* is also, in part, a book about role reversal in which a teen assumes a parenting function with regard to his emotionally weak single mother and a middle-aged daughter over-protectively mothers her widowed eighty-yearold father. *Being with Henry* demonstrates the surprising commonalities shared by those who are very different ages.

The book's central character, Laker Wyatt, first appeared in "The Kindness of Strangers," one of the stories in the collection *Traveling on into the Light*. Interestingly, that same collection contains three stories that feature Sidonie and Kieran, characters from Brooks's first YA novel, *Two Moons in August*.

Feedback from both Brooks's adult and young adult readers indicated that they continued to worry about Laker because, in that initial short story, "The Kindness of Strangers," he had been left, rejected and betrayed by his mother, still sitting at the kitchen table with Henry Olsen. At the story's conclusion, Laker has no clear vision of where he will go or what he will do, but he was clear about the kindness of his host. Brooks said that writing *Being with Henry* was her response to those reader concerns.

About the Author

Martha Brooks was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on July 15, 1944. However, while Winnipeg continued to be her home, she actually spent her first seventeen years on the grounds of the Manitoba Sanatorium at Ninette in southwestern Manitoba, where her father, Alfred Leroy Paine, was the superintendent and chief surgeon and her mother, Theodis, was a nurse.

Brooks received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book Award for *Paradise Cafe and Other Stories*. Someone had remarked about her ability to write so well of isolation, and while she graciously accepted the compliment, Brooks explained that she wrote well about isolation because it was a subject with which she had much personal experience. A second child, Brooks was eight when her sister left for university and fourteen when she returned. Because of her father's position at the Ninette facility, which provided health care for people who had contracted tuberculosis, the patients and their caregivers were kept quite separate from the larger community outside the sanatorium. Although Brooks believes being isolated is not a state that most children would choose, in her case it led to her developing what she called an artist's eye. A child among so many adults, she was like an observer on the outside looking in. While a sense of isolation came to pervade Brooks's later writing for adolescents, her childhood experiences of growing up at the tuberculosis treatment facility also provided her with the recurring theme of hope. Her parents had deliberately not protected her emotionally from all the sadness she observed in many seriously ill patients. Yet, along with this sorrow, she also observed so many examples of hope, and she carried this hope forward into her adulthood and incorporated it in her books.

After high school, Brooks worked at a variety of jobs, including modeling and teaching modeling, performing in summer musical theater, and working as a secretary.

In 1967, she married Brian Brooks. After their daughter Kirsten was born in 1972, Brooks began writing in a big way. Her first published book, the autobiographical *A Hill for Looking* (1982), was based on events that took place in Ninette when Brooks was between eight and twelve. Brooks regarded the 1988 publication of her collection of short stories, *Paradise Cafe and Other Stories*, as marking her real emergence as a writer.

Finding a publisher for *Paradise Cafe and Other Stories* proved to be difficult for Brooks, and seven publishers rejected the manuscript before it was finally accepted. Apparently, some publishers thought the works were suited to teens, while other publishers thought they were more suited to adults. To date, this audience crossover quality has characterized readers of her work that was marketed to adolescents. Brooks has stated that she does not think of herself as a young adult writer but rather as a fiction writer who, years ago, got caught in the YA genre and simply never left it. Nonetheless, she enjoys the fit, especially because her publishers allow her to keep redefining it. Since that first collection of YA stories, Brooks has written another, *Traveling on into the Light*



and Other Stories, plus three novels, *Two Moons in August*, *Bone Dance*, and *Being with Henry*. She has also authored or coauthored four plays for juveniles.

While Brooks is a self-taught writer, for a number of years she was involved in a mentoring program for high school students who aspired to be writers. Regarding these one-on-one sessions that were conducted in her home, she notes that as a mentor she focused more on the journey of the writing process than on the result or product. For example, each year a student only had to write one story, but that story would be rewritten many times and discussed as Brooks and the student mutually explored the craft of writing. If success as a teacher is measured just by tangible results, then Brooks must have been a superb instructor for two of her students won the Canadian Authors Association's annual national Student Writing Contest for Fiction, and one of these individuals has since had a collection of her short stories published.

Brooks is also a jazz singer, having discovered jazz at the age of four. She studied voice for four years and developed a classically trained coloratura soprano voice with a three-and-a-half octave range. As of the early 2000s Brooks has renewed her commitment to jazz, performing with the Martha Brooks Quartet and releasing an album, *Change of Heart*. She told Quill & Quire's Donald Budget that "The balance that develops in my life from writing and singing is really healthy.... Writing involves so much navel gazing, and singing is so free and out there—especially jazz."

Critical recognition in the form of prizes and being named to honor lists has been bestowed on each of Brooks's YA books.

She has been nominated three times for the Governor General's Literary Award in Children's Literature, Canada's most prestigious literary award.

Setting

Being with Henry is located in the Minnesota cities of Minneapolis, Duluth, and Bemidji. Brooks uses the U.S. setting, which was the initial setting for Laker's home in "The Kindness of Strangers" because she saw something there that had impressed her. She reported seeing a telephone booth in Bemidji with a sign over it urging people to call home. Street kids were all around, apparently homeless or quite detached from their homes. This scene left a permanent impression on her.

Readers first meet Laker and his mother, Audrey, in a Minneapolis Safeway parking lot. Audrey accidentally encounters trucker Rick, Laker's future stepfather. Following the marriage of Audrey and Rick, Duluth becomes the threesome's new home, and the place in which Laker, now economically dependent upon Rick, becomes increasingly angry over what he perceives as Rick's escalating emotional abuse of Audrey.

When Laker's anger manifests itself as a physical attack on Rick, Audrey, pregnant with Rick's child, sides with her new husband and orders Laker out of the house. At the Duluth bus station, Laker decides to take the next bus, which happens to be departing for Bemidji.

However, in the concluding section of Being with Henry, set at Heron Lake, Brooks brings her characters back to Canada, specifically to Manitoba and to the Lacs des Placottes area, a fictionalized location that, in different forms, has appeared in most of her other works, but most notably in Two Moons in August and Bone Dance. As already noted, the American setting came about by default, but Brooks has affirmed that she prefers to write from her own landscape, especially the landscape of her youth, the steep grassy hills around the sanatorium.



Social Sensitivity

The subject matter of a mother deciding to throw her own child out of his home may be of concern to some readers. Audrey's response unfortunately mirrors the reality for many contemporary teens who are evicted because they are unable or unwilling to submit to parental expectations regarding conduct or house rules. In terms of the book's plot, Audrey's behavior with regard to Laker is completely consistent with her character for she is more child herself than parent. Consequently, caught in a situation that calls for her to choose between maintaining her relationship with her provider or becoming a provider, the decision is easy. Brooks says that she always attempts to keep healing and hope in mind. Consequently, even though Laker is forced from his home by his mother's decision in the novel's opening section, on the book's last page, he concludes his visit on a hopeful note by alluding to his possible return: "Maybe I'll come to Winnipeg for Thanksgiving."

Laker, Henry, and Rick use profanity.

Interestingly, the youngest and oldest both use such language in what might be characterized as age appropriate ways. Laker resorts to employing profanity during his moments of adolescent anger when he seeks to hurt rather than to argue or debate. Therefore, when Laker is angry with his stepfather Rick, he calls him an "a—hole." However, in a less emotional moment, Laker refers to Rick as a "half-baked toad." Henry, on the other hand, has come to that point in life when he is probably not even aware of his occasional use of profanity. For instance, when he talks about the mundane subjects, these topics are automatically and unconsciously prefaced with "[g —d—]."

Rick's use of profanity is in keeping with his character. He is a "real" man, and real men drink, womanize, and swear. Rick's reaction when Laker gets drunk during the wedding reception is not to chastise him the next day. Instead, "Rick claps him on the back. 'You really tied one on.' There is an edge of pride in his voice."

Laker's underage drinking may be interpreted as presenting adolescent readers with a poor role model. Although Laker, to use his own words, does get "totally wasted" three times in the novel's opening section, he comes to learn that alcohol is not the solution to his problems. Later, when Laker is offered a drink at Charlene Sorenson's home by her mother, he replies, "No thanks, . . . I'm not a drinker."

Finally, the book contains ageism. The perpetrator's prejudice of the elderly is not an isolated case; many may sympathize with her beliefs. Interestingly, some readers may approve of this kind of ageism, readers who could perceive the actions of the "ageist" individual as being selfless, possibly even self-sacrificing. The perpetrator is Vera Lynne, Henry's middle-aged daughter, who is the self-appointed surrogate mother or wife to her father. The elderly father describes his daughter's controlling actions by saying, "My wife died over two years ago, and I've been henpecked ever since. . . . She [Vera Lynne] operates on the notion that anybody over seventyfive has nothing to



contribute." As the recipient of Vera Lynne's unwanted care, which robs him of his adult independence, Henry seeks small victories, and he even admits to Laker, "You need to know that my taking you in was, at first, partly a protest against my daughter's interfering way." Vera Lynne's actions can also be seen as having sexist overtones for, had the situation been reversed and it was Henry who had predeceased his wife, Marianne, it is unlikely that Vera Lynne would have immediately assumed the same unbidden control of her mother's life.

Literary Qualities

While Brooks's first YA novel, *Two Moons in August*, has a conventional chapter arrangement, her second novel, *Bone Dance*, is divided into two parts, each part having its own separately numbered chapters. With *Being with Henry*, Brooks continued the idea of dividing the novel into parts. This time using three. She describes her structural decisions as coming out of a sense of desperation so that the books work. *Being with Henry*'s opening section, "Dreams and Lies" consisting of just four chapters, deals with Laker's time first with Audrey, then with Audrey and Rick, and concludes with his arrival in Bemidji. The second section, "Henry," the longest section with seventeen chapters, focuses on the developing relationship between Laker and Henry, while the ten chapters of the third section, "Heron Lake," bring closure to many aspects of Laker's life including the meaning of his dreams.

Another stylistic device Brooks uses in *Being with Henry* is that of italicized dream fragments which introduce some of the chapters. These are Laker's journal entries. Initially, the dream pieces appear completely unconnected to the plot; however, their meanings become clear in the book's concluding segment, "Heron Lake." Incorporating psychological elements into the narrative adds to the intensity as Laker discovers the meaning of his dreams, integrates those meanings into his understanding of reality, and, during this process, finds an old friend to be helpful in bridging gaps in Laker's life.

The writing style includes unique images and turns of phrase that expand with the extraordinary. As an example, in the passage in which Gretel has just described Laker's pouch creation as being "imaginative," Laker's reaction to unexpected praise entails contradictions which make the intangible become tangible: "It was a moment that filled him with light. For a long time after that, he would examine this little piece of time in his mind, slowing it down, stretching it out."



Themes and Characters

The theme of initiation in the face of love and loss is doubly central to *Being with Henry*, in which Laker loses his mother to another man and then, having found love with Henry, must face the inevitability of Henry's death. Near the book's conclusion, Laker actually articulates that theme when he asks, "Is this what he came to Henry's to learn? That just as soon as you let yourself love someone, you have to lose them?"

Brooks added another dimension to the book's theme; much of *Being with Henry* has to do with alienation and the frustrations of both old age and of youth as they come together. While sixteen-year-old Laker desperately tries to find his independent place in the adult world, eighty-three-year-old Henry Olsen discovers that his adult independence is slowly being taken from him and that, in some ways, his daughter, Vera Lynne Sorenson, is treating him as if he were a dependent child again and she his parent. It seems Vera believes anyone over seventy-five has nothing to contribute.

Two other central themes in the book are the interdependence of human beings and the role that chance plays in life. The novel presents numerous examples of interdependency, but the central one is that which exists between Laker and his mother. Prior to Audrey's marriage to Rick, Laker is the man of the house, and he tries to take care of his mother, including lying to her employers when she is too depressed to get out of bed to go to work. In return, Audrey gives Laker love. However, when Rick comes along, Audrey sees that she can be dependent on him instead. Explaining to Laker why she is marrying Rick, Audrey says, "Laker, he works hard and he wants to take care of us." When Laker responds, "I can get another job. A real job. I can take care of both of us," Audrey cruelly answers, "Laker, you're just a kid." As to the role that chance plays in life, Brooks again provides many examples in the novel. For instance, it is a chance encounter in a Minneapolis Safeway parking lot that brings Rick into Audrey's life, and likewise it is a coincidence that causes Laker and Henry to meet on a street in Bemidji. Later in the novel, it is Henry's decision to visit his summer cabin on Heron Lake in Manitoba that again causes Laker to encounter the Cree woman, Merry, who has a connection to Audrey's past and who is able to provide Laker with the origins and meanings of his dreams.

In her recent novels, the central characters have tended to be seventeen-year-olds.

Brooks likes to use the voice of individuals who are that age because they are on the cusp between young adulthood and adulthood. Moreover, Brooks brings minor characters to life. For example, when Henry's adult daughter, Vera Lynne, first comes to Henry's house after Laker's arrival, her behavior, as reported by Laker, clearly indicates how she feels about Laker's presence.

When she arrives at her father's house, Vera walks in, uninvited, right past them, not even acknowledging her father. Minutes later she emerges with a pail full of cleaning supplies, stomps past them, and gets into her car, slamming the door. She and the granddaughter drive off.



Brooks conveys the layered complexity of human relationships, specifically in the relationship between Laker and Henry. One example of this interplay between the two can be seen when Laker gets very angry over Henry's secretly writing to Audrey, his mother, but that emotion is quickly replaced by Laker's concern when Henry has to be hospitalized because of bronchial pneumonia. This complexity can also be seen in the opening stages of Laker's relationship with Charlene, Henry's granddaughter, for she is jealous that Laker may be taking her place in her grandfather's affections.

Regarding the roles characters play in *Being with Henry*, Brooks says that she sees the writer's job as thinking of new ways in which to interpret what real people do and catching them in small revelatory moments.

Consequently, she claims not to write about issues. While she acknowledges that issues may come up in her books, she sees herself as writing first about people, about how we, as human beings, relate to our inner conflicts and our outer chance connections and gifts.



Topics for Discussion

1. Being with Henry has been published in both the United States and Canada. The two editions have different covers. How are your impressions of the book's contents influenced by the differing cover art? Which do you prefer? Why? The Canadian cover can be found on the CM: Canadian Review of Materials website while the American cover can be viewed at sites such as Amazon.com.
2. The first section of Being with Henry is entitled "Dreams and Lies." What are the dreams and lies to which this title refers?
3. Assume the role of Laker, Audrey, or Rick, and using only the information found in the book's first segment, "Dreams and Lies," describe the other two characters. If you elect to do roleplay, try to adopt your character's body language as well.
4. Often when we read books, especially novels, we skip those pages of "stuff" at the beginning and jump directly into the first chapter. If we did that with Being with Henry, we would miss a quotation that Brooks uses to introduce the book. It reads: "Sometimes I go about pitying myself, / and all the time / I am being carried on great winds across the sky"—Anonymous, Chippewa. How is this quotation relevant to the contents of Being with Henry? What do you think these lines mean?
5. A statement like, "You have to be careful of guys like that, Audrey," is one that you might expect a father to make to his daughter when she wants to date someone disapproved of by the father, but in this case, it is uttered by a son to his mother. In Being with Henry, there are numerous incidents of role reversals. Discuss other incidents of role reversal in the book, explaining how they work and what their significance is. Who else engages in role reversal, and in what ways do they do so?
6. Why do you think Laker really dislikes Rick? Are Laker's negative feelings towards his stepfather just because Rick is verbally abusive toward Audrey?
7. Henry tells Laker, "See, there's this big difference between us. . . . Unlike me, you've got a thousand more chances to start over again with people." Identify some other points in the story where, if given another chance, people could have started over. What could they have said that might have led to a different result?
8. Henry informs Laker that he stopped driving when he was eighty-two years old and after he had an accident. Henry adds, "Kissed off a good-sized chunk of my independence right then and there." Do you think that when people reach a certain age, they should be required to surrender their licenses to drive? What are the arguments for and against such an idea?
9. At one point, when Laker describes the sandwich his mother is eating, he says, "She's eating a poverty sandwich—bread, ketchup, a little sliced onion." What other meals could be used to signify a poor financial condition?



10. While Laker and Henry discuss the unusual circumstances that led to Henry's first encounter with Marianne, Henry's now deceased wife, Henry observes, "Life is full of these kinds of chance meetings, don't you think?" Have you experienced such a chance meeting?

How has it changed your life?

11. Explain how *Being with Henry* encourages readers to see the two stages of life, adolescence and old age, as being very much alike.

12. *Being with Henry* is based on a short story, "The Kindness of Strangers." Why do you think that Brooks changed the title when she wrote the novel? Which title do you prefer? Why?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. During the summer that Laker worked for Gretel, she introduced him to plays, and he read more than fifty. However, Laker tells readers that Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* became his most favorite play of all." If you have not already read this play, locate a detailed summary. What about *A Streetcar Named Desire* would cause Laker to be so drawn to it?

2. Henry says of his daughter, Vera Lynne, "She operates on the notion that anybody over seventy-five has nothing to contribute." Vera Lynne is not likely alone in that perception. Examine prevailing images of senior citizens that are presented in the news and entertainment media, including print and television advertising, to determine how older people are viewed.

3. Henry, who is 83, says of his years, "Golden years be damned. They are not golden. It's all a lie. Nobody ever tells you that getting old is hell." Interview a number of people from various decades to identify their perceptions of old age.

4. Laker Wyatt was originally a character in the short story "The Kindness of Strangers," which can be found in Brooks's collection of stories, *Traveling on into the Light*. Obtain a copy of the short story and consider how Brooks incorporated the contents of the short story into the novel *Being with Henry*.

How, why, and with what effect did she make changes to details in the short story when she expanded it into a novel?

5. Research the problem of runaway adolescents in your community, state, province, or country. Is the information you find consistent with the novel's portrayal?

6. In the closing page of *Being with Henry* and just as Laker is about to leave Winnipeg and return to Henry, he says to his mother, "Maybe I'll come to Winnipeg for Thanksgiving." Readers do not know whether Laker does or does not come back. Write a scene that focuses on the Thanksgiving weekend, one which reveals Laker's decision and his reasons for making that decision.

For Further Reference

Brabander, Jennifer M. Review of *Being with Henry*. *Horn Book Magazine* (May/June 2000): 309. This positive review states that "Brooks is still a master at conveying the complexity of human relationships."

"Brooks, Martha." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 68. Detroit: Gale, 1992, pp.

39-41. Written just after Brooks's first YA novel, *Two Moons in August*, appeared, most of the piece is given over to Brooks's description of her writing up to that point. This entry includes a photo of the author.

"Brooks, Martha." In *St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers*. Detroit: St. James Press, 1999, pp. 104-105. In addition to biographical information and a list of publications for young adults and awards won, the article also provides a critical overview of Brooks's writings for adolescents.

Budget, Donald. Review of *Being with Henry*.

Quill & Quire (February 2000): 45. This "starred" review asserts that "Brooks's latest novel for young adults expands the horizon of the coming-of-age story."

Donald, Bridget. "The Many Voices of Martha Brooks." *Quill & Quire* (June 1999): 62. This brief interview with Brooks describes her writing process, focusing on *Being with Henry*.

Hilbun, Janet. Review of *Being with Henry*.

School Library Journal (May 2000): 170.

This piece is a brief, positive review.

Review of *Being with Henry*. *Kirkus Reviews* (April 15, 2000): 555. This brief review concludes: "Brooks deals with universal adolescent themes of home, self, and romance with a fresh hand, creating a memorable story that begs repeating."

Review of *Being with Henry*. *Publishers Weekly* (April 3, 2000): 82. This negative review finds several faults in Brooks's writing: "the awkward structure, improbable plot and stereotyped characters ultimately undermine the novel. . . . this novel relies heavily on coincidence and catastrophe."

Related Titles/Adaptations

Being with Henry is based on a short story, "The Kindness of Strangers," which first appeared in Brooks's collection, *Traveling on into the Light*. Readers who might be intrigued by the idea of short stories providing the impetus for novels can also read short story-novel connected books such as Anne Laurel Carter's *In the Clear*, whose central character, Pauline, initially appeared in the story "Leaving the Iron Lung," part of the collection *Close-Ups*. Jim Hawkins first appeared as the main character in "The Bermuda Triangle," one of the short stories in Wynne-Jones's collection, *Lord of the Fries*, and then he was the lead player in the novel *The Boy in the Burning House*. Students could also be directed to the six short stories in Chris Crutcher's *Athletic Shorts*, a book in which the characters had previously been introduced in one of Crutcher's novels. They appear in *Athletic Shorts* at points before or after the time setting of the novels.



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