

The Bells of Bleeker Street Short Guide

The Bells of Bleeker Street by Valenti Angelo

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Overview

Written in 1949, *The Bells of Bleecker Street* has lost some of its timeliness.

Nevertheless, readers can benefit from the perceptive treatment of the nature of truth, as Angelo skillfully portrays the abstract ideas inherent in concrete situations. Although much of the action is based on trite, perhaps stereotypical, incidents, the lessons to be learned from this story remain worthwhile.

About the Author

Valenti Angelo was born on June 23, 1897, in Massarosa, Tuscany, Italy.

During his early childhood, the village woodcarver encouraged him to become an artist. At the age of eight, Angelo immigrated with his family to the United States, where he attended schools for a brief time in California. At fifteen, he joined the labor force, working first in a paper mill and then in rubber, glass, and steel plants. In 1916 he moved from his parents' home to San Francisco in order to continue his artistic education. He married Maxine Grimm in 1923 and had two children.

Angelo's first break came during the three years he worked for a photoengraving company. He began illustrating books for Grabhorn Press in 1926, and his skillful illustrations and decorative pieces were recognized as accomplished works of art. In 1933 Angelo became a free-lance artist, gaining an even greater reputation in the field of graphic arts. Thirty-seven books containing his illustrations have been included in the American Institute of Graphic Arts' Fifty Books of the Year Exhibitions. In 1937 he began to write the children's books that he illustrated.

During his active years as a writer, from before World War II to the 1960s, Angelo earned praise as an exceptional storyteller. Writing of the places and times with which he was most familiar, he often describes the world through the eyes of an immigrant youth. His books frequently express his affection for both America and Italy, yet his universal insights into the hearts and minds of the young defy ethnic and cultural barriers.

Setting

The action begins and ends in the section of Manhattan often called "Little Italy." Other New York landmarks important to the story include Greenwich Village, Washington and Sheridan squares, Penn Station, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Seventh Avenue, the Avenue of the Americas, Mott Street, and, of course, Bleecker Street.

Amidst the bustling cacophony of the New York setting, the Enrico family's apartment becomes the pivotal spot where the action unfolds. Three generations of Enricos live in the apartment: Grampa and Nonna, Joey's mother and father, and Joey and his younger sister, Linda. Absorbed with concerns of day-to-day living in a 1940s ItalianAmerican household, Grampa and Nonna take care of Linda, while the mother cooks and cleans. As the story begins, Joey's father is fighting in World War II, but Sgt. Enrico soon returns from the war to resume his work as a locally famous frame-maker. Joey and his friends enjoy wandering through the city streets, where every small incident becomes an adventure and a learning experience.

Social Sensitivity

The way of life and the attitudes expressed in *The Bells of Bleecker Street* are now quite dated. Joey and his friends are too innocent to be realistic by today's standards. Female characters appear only as generic representations of girlfriends, little sisters, and mothers.

The idea set forth in this story that only Italians live in Little Italy was no more true in 1949 than it is today. One must overlook these faults in order to appreciate Angelo's intentions for this work.

Some readers and parents may be disturbed by the book's emphasis on Catholicism, but Angelo concentrates on the role religion can play in an individual's sense of moral and social obligations rather than on dogma.

Although the novel's focus is social, the author is less concerned with cultural and sociological forces than he is with the thoughts and emotions of his characters as they try to fulfill their social responsibilities. Indeed, Angelo displays an in-depth understanding of the trials and tribulations of a boy growing up in a close-knit society and seeking answers to the big questions in life.

The novel encourages a genuine sense of respect for others and a positive appreciation for the truth.

Literary Qualities

Angelo's descriptions of characters and settings contain his best writing.

His imagery evokes feelings, sights, and sounds that project the reader into the scene. As Joey's girlfriend mourns her dead cat, Angelo elicits a strong sense of atmosphere: "A soft warm breeze stole into the dingy yard and lazily fanned the wash on the line. The distant sound of a radio playing 'Rhapsody in Blue' echoed over the neighborhood." Not only does he draw detailed, moving episodes, but his images create a contemplative tone rich with implicit deeper meaning.

Music is a significant symbol throughout *The Bells of Bleecker Street*. Emphasizing the strong Roman Catholic convictions of New York's Little Italy, the sound of bells and chimes that emanates from the Church of Our Lady of Pompeii suggests the constant influence of spirituality within the community.

The main characters reinforce the religious significance of music by performing in the church ensemble. To Angelo, music represents life, and with patience, frequent practice, and divine inspiration, one may learn to harmonize with the world. Music embodies the elements that Angelo values the most: faith and an appreciation for the arts.



Themes and Characters

The Bells of Bleecker Streets primary themes revolve around the sometimes subtle harm of untruths, the importance of friendship and the factors that test its limits, family loyalties, cultural differences, and the role of the artist.

The story also provides a colorful portrayal of the urban ethnic neighborhood, demonstrating the effects of World War II on family and community, and illustrating the influence of Catholicism on daily life in the Italian community.

Treating the concepts of faith, grace, and sin, the story centers on a group of boys who belong to a church ensemble that performs during the Christmas mass.

The Bells of Bleecker Street holds both religious and universal implications, maintaining a balance of deep religiosity and common-sense ethics. Angelo sees the struggle to learn how to live morally as a crucial aspect of the human condition, and this novel depicts characters who meet this challenge with courage.

Joey Enrico, the main character, is a typical young boy. Generally obedient, he sometimes gets into minor scrapes and trouble. Still, the spiritual and artistic interests of Joey and many of his friends set them apart from their peers.

Joey's study of the violin leads him to the discovery that spiritual faith can provide the inspiration and courage required to perform artistically. Angelo portrays Joey as a model boy, not because he is angelic and God-fearing—on the contrary, he gets into his fair share of trouble—but because, deep down, he possesses a wholesome blend of religious fortitude and artistic ability.

Joey's many friends are crucial to the story, particularly his brother Michael, "Pete the Squeak" Ryan, Professor Dante, and Father Bennino. Pete the Squeak is an impetuous, strong-willed, yet friendly boy who still has some growing up to do. Intelligent and inventive, he is almost like a younger brother to Joey. Father Bennino and Professor Dante serve as Joey's mentors: Father Bennino offers spiritual advice; Professor Dante provides artistic tutelage. Men of strong convictions, they both seem to acquire their strengths from selfless involvement with the community.

Reminiscent of the artist Norman Rockwell, Angelo paints a charming portrait of the American dream with characters that are not necessarily realistic but serve as good role models. Generally, the novel's conflicts do not develop between the characters, they occur within the individuals. Daily living presents issues that challenge the boys' values. For instance, characters wonder how to handle anger toward a friend, about the implications of keeping a piece of a sacred statue as a good luck piece, and whether comforting a girlfriend whose cat has died justifies breaking rules against staying out late. Although Angelo does not provide all the answers, he suggests that the world could be a harmonious place if humankind would allow for artistic expression and live by Christian ideals.



Topics for Discussion

1. Early in the book, "Pete the Squeak" frequently takes fruit from Jacobo's stand. Does his hunger justify taking the fruit?

2. Joey Enrico takes home the toe from the statue of St. John as a good luck charm. What are the consequences of this action? Is any harm done?

3. After the end of the war is announced, the churches in Joey's area organize parades to commemorate the day. Father Bennino and Father Branigan must decide who will lead the parade. Is their decision a sound one?

Why or why not?

4. Joey's father fights in Italy during the war. What are the effects of war on the soldiers? What is the effect on the people home in America?

5. In chapter 5, what causes the gesso to burn? Could it have been avoided? If so, how?

6. When Peggy di Lucca's cat dies, she decides it must have a proper burial.

What happens as a result of her decision? Are the boys right in carrying out her wishes?

7. Toward the end of the story, Joey and Peter get into a fight at Professor Dante's studio. What do they fight over?

Who is at fault?

8. Before his violin solo during the Christmas show, Joey begins to doubt himself. What gives him the courage to play? Have you had a similar experience?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Ethnic communities can be found in cities across America. What are some of the most prominent ones and where are they? Why do you think these communities develop? What are some of the positive and negative effects of such ethnic grouping?
2. For much of World War II, Italy opposed the United States. How did this affect the Italian-Americans living in America during this period?
3. Artistic ability is an important part of Joey's life. His father is a framemaker, Joey plays the violin, and music fills the air almost continuously in Greenwich Village. How important is art in today's society? Perhaps you might choose one artistic medium and show its influence on contemporary culture.
4. Valenti Angelo is a consummate storyteller. What literary devices does he use to make his stories come alive? Provide examples from at least three chapters.
5. Much of the action of *The Bells of Bleecker Street* takes place in post-war Greenwich Village, New York. How realistic is Angelo's version of Greenwich Village? How has that area changed since the end of World War II?

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