

Beyond Dreams Short Guide

Beyond Dreams by Marilyn Reynolds

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Overview

Beyond Dreams is a collection of short stories that focus on high school students facing difficult challenges. Each of the six stories deals with a crisis, including school failure, domestic violence, drunk driving, teen pregnancy, racism, and the aging of a close relative. These themes hit home for many of Reynolds' readers who have either found themselves in similar circumstances or know someone who has. The characters in the collection must learn to make sense of the world around them and determine the best course of action to pull them out of their slump and better their lives. The protagonists in all the stories have found themselves on a much different path than they imagined in their dreams. However disturbing the subject matter, Reynolds gives her readers a hopeful message. She creates characters with the common sense and the motivation to overcome their hardships, and they succeed. With a little help from friends and caring adults, they manage to make sensible decisions and get themselves back on track.

About the Author

Marilyn Reynolds was born on May 17, 1935, in what is now Toronto, Canada. She has worked as a library assistant, a teacher, and a writer in addition to raising three children, now grown. Reynolds has written for both children and adults and has published essays and short stories in newspapers, journals, and literary magazines. Her books for young adults generally center around the struggle to meet challenges, with her characters often making difficult decisions to change the course of their lives.

Reynolds has published several books about teenage challenges, all published in a series called "True-To Life Series from Hamilton High." *Beyond Dreams* is the third book in this series and the only collection of short stories. Reynolds has received the most recognition for her young adult literature, and her frank treatment of controversial subject matter has brought her both praise and criticism. *Too Soon for Jeff* and *Detour for Emily* have both been named American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults, though they have also been the object of several banning attempts.

Reynolds' books do cover sensitive subject matter, but they also discuss topics that the author knows touch the lives of teenagers from all walks of life. While working in an alternative high school, she was able to talk to young people every day who struggle with problems similar to those of the characters she creates.

Reynolds lives in Sacramento, California, and continues to teach and write. She relies on input from her students to add depth and substance to her stories and to help her dig deep into the minds of teenagers in crisis situations.

Setting

The backdrop for this book and the other books in the "Hamilton High" series is an urban, racially diverse high school in Southern California. All of the stories do not take place within the school however. Reynolds sometimes removes her characters from this environment to bring the reader into their personal dilemmas. In "Only If You Think So," the first of the six stories, Jason, the protagonist, has left Hamilton High because of poor grades and moved to Sojourner High School, a school his father calls "Loser High." Reynolds takes readers into Jason's dysfunctional home to shed light on how Jason came to view himself as a loser in the first place.

Clearly, Reynolds uses this setting both to emphasize the odds Jason is up against and to help him recognize his motivation to beat these odds. It would be all too easy for Jason to fall into the same pattern his father fell into, sitting in front of the television all day with a hostile attitude, but Jason wants something more out of his life. He sees what his father has become, and finds refuge at Sojourner High. It is there that he meets with caring adults who help him get on the right track and give him the opportunities he needs to succeed.

Through the course of the novel, Reynolds takes readers inside other dysfunctional homes. In "Baby Help," the protagonist Melissa lives with her abusive boyfriend, Rudy, their two-year-old baby, Cheyenne, and Rudy's mother, Irma. The home setting again is one Melissa needs to break out of, but until she realizes the danger behind Rudy's abuse, she finds it easier to live in what she once considered a "stable" environment than to branch out into the unknown world alone. But all of the characters are heading out into the unknown world, and they all discover that there is help out there if only they learn to accept it.

Social Sensitivity

Reynolds' book teaches young adults about morality and responsibility. The characters she creates seem real and their emotions convincing because many teens understand the crises these characters face and they need to read about ways of dealing with them. Reynolds incorporates information on personal and social responsibility into the text without seeming preachy.

She makes us realize the difficulties of teen pressures and the likelihood of falling into difficult traps. It is all too easy, Reynolds recognizes, to feel trapped by crisis situations and to start defining yourself as a loser.

Teenagers who find themselves in these situations often feel that they have to fight stereotypes. Reynolds helps her teenager readers (as well as Jason himself) understand that Jason is not a loser because he has been on a losing track for a while, and she helps them understand that Christina and Melissa are not unable to become responsible parents because they failed to act responsibly in the past. Fortunately, most of the characters in the book have adults in their lives who do not judge them but help them fight stereotypical images of teens in trouble. Reynolds underscores the ability of adults to help, but she also gives her protagonists good minds and the ability to find their own strength. She clearly conveys the message that no matter how difficult the crisis, people do have the ability to remold their lives, even though they cannot change the past. She lets her readers know that even people who feel trapped in hopeless situations can decide their own futures, create their own happiness, and break past patterns that have kept them from realizing their dreams.

Reynolds covers universal themes in her book that teenagers from all walks of life often understand intimately. Drinking and driving, racism, school failure, unwanted pregnancy, partner abuse, and the intrusion of an aging relative are all issues that teens understand can affect their own lives.

These are issues familiar to teens, whether they attend urban, ethnically mixed high schools or not. All teenagers hear about the dangers of drunk driving and the importance of safe sex, but Reynolds' characters drive the seriousness of these issues home.

Reynolds is never condescending toward her characters or critical of their situations, but rather she is compassionate and she gives her characters credit for their ability to make good decisions.

Not only does Reynolds' book cover pertinent social issues but her stories speak to both males and females. She also presents a multicultural cast of characters. Several critics have recommended this book for "reluctant readers," for those who may respond to this kind of writing because they may recognize these characters from their own lives and understand the relevance of their situations. But despite its nearly universal appeal,

Reynolds' books and other books that deal with sensitive subject matter have often been the subject of banning attempts.

Some parents wish to protect their children from these situations and they believe books such as *Beyond Dreams* make controversial issues such as teenage sex and abortion seem all too common and even acceptable. But working in an alternative school, Reynolds knows the reality of these situations and recognizes the need to raise the consciousness of her readers about how they can deal with them. Her stories are both cautionary and thought provoking; they teach critical thinking, foster personal development, and teach responsible behavior. They give readers the message that there are consequences to their actions, but they still have control. She educates and empowers her readers by supplying information on social programs for pregnant teenagers and for abused wives and girlfriends. The author introduces other avenues troubled teenagers can explore to help themselves out of trouble and prevent their lives from spiraling downward.



Literary Qualities

In writing *Beyond Dreams*, Reynolds is faced with the dual task of developing separate voices for each of her stories and advancing themes that unify her collection.

She develops separate voices by varying her literary techniques and narrative styles and by alternating between male and female narrators. She relates each of the character's stories in first person, allowing readers insight into the characters' thought processes. The protagonists in each of these stories undergoes a transformation during the unraveling of their tales, and the first person narration helps readers understand the characters' changing thoughts and emotions. The transformation process is one unifying theme in the collection. So is the process of evaluation, as Reynolds analyzes the ways in which people face challenges and deal with turmoil. Because Reynolds succeeds at distinguishing each of her characters as unique individuals, readers witness the reasoning process from different viewpoints and see the ways that individual people move themselves out of crisis.

The characters in all these stories are reflective, and they are believable because most readers can understand the confusing thought processes that plague individuals during difficult times.

In several of the stories, Reynolds uses foreshadowing to hint at what it will take for her protagonists to make the decisions they need to make in order to lead happier lives. Early in the story "Baby Help," Melissa relates the emotions she experienced one time when Cheyenne fell into the deep end of a swimming pool. Melissa, unable to swim, jumped in immediately to save Cheyenne. "Any time my baby needs help," she says, "I'll be there, even if it means risking my own life. That's how I know I love her more than myself." This remark allows readers to surmise that Melissa will leave Rudy, and that she will do so when she realizes that Cheyenne is in danger. Melissa puts up with Rudy's abuse time and time again, but just one incident of Rudy abusing Cheyenne spurs Melissa to action. As she said, she loves Cheyenne more than herself. Just as in the pool incident, she did not hesitate one moment to save her daughter from a dangerous situation and her maternal protectiveness kicked in when she witnessed Rudy slowly undermining Cheyenne's self-esteem. Once Melissa realized that Rudy's controlling behavior could potentially destroy her daughter's resolve, making the decision to move out came just as naturally and instantaneously as jumping into the pool.

While foreshadowing helps readers see the path these characters will take in the future, flashbacks help readers see the path they traveled in the past that led them to where they are now. In "What If," Paul remembers the years before the accident when he developed a close relationship with Gabe, and he flashes back to just before the accident when he had a few beers, failed to recognize that Gabe was not wearing a seat belt, and failed to protect his friend from the drunk driver who ended Gabe's life. Alternating between detailing the present and flashing back to the past helps readers understand how Paul must deal with this tragedy. He has to dissect his life in order to



put it back together. Dwelling on the "what ifs" after tragedy occurs is a natural part of the grieving process, and defining the tragic event in relation to what occurred before and after helps him put the incident in perspective. It also helps readers see how it is both possible and necessary to evaluate a crisis and work through it in order to get past the devastation and move toward self-actualization.

Paul's turmoil in "What If" conveys a powerful message about the horrors of drunk driving, and Christina's turmoil in deciding what to do about her unwanted pregnancy conveys a powerful message about the consequences of unprotected sex. Reynolds has been criticized for both her raw language and her controversial subject matter. But she is a master at creating realistic dialogue that helps convey teenage confusion and helps explain their fears and desires. Think about the significance of the title *Beyond Dreams*. All these characters have dreams, but it is their determination and strength that helps them get beyond dreaming and create their own reality. Think about the title "What If." "What if I had made a different choice?" is the inevitable question of anyone who wishes he or she could change what happened to make things go wrong. It is also a necessary question, and those who analyze that question in their minds find it an affirmation of the availability of choices. Any one can change their lives if they want to badly enough, Reynolds tells her readers. She also tells them, as the title "Only If You Think So" implies, that they will remain in a losing situation only if think they are losers. But if they understand they have other options, they can in fact become winners.

One way Reynolds helps her characters move in the right direction is by allowing them to recognize their ability to reason and their faith in the mind's strength. Another way she helps them is by teaching them responsible behavior. She incorporates important lessons naturally into the dialogue, such as revealing to her characters tips for responsible parenting and information on social programs available to teens in trouble, and by encouraging discussions that lead high school students to identify and evaluate the effect of racist attitudes. Clearly, Reynolds wishes to teach her readers morals and help them learn how to be responsible, caring adults. Yet her writing never appears preachy. Her natural, flowing dialogue and her sensitivity toward her characters' emotions help teen readers relate the problems these fictional high schoolers have to problems of their own. Her ability to get into her characters' minds and expose both their strengths and their weaknesses helps anyone who reads her book evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses and gives them the positive message that though they cannot change past mistakes, they can change past behaviors.



Themes and Characters

Perhaps the primary theme in *Beyond Dreams* is the importance of turning challenging situations into opportunities. This is the theme that links all the stories and all the characters in the collection. Reynolds' protagonists all find themselves in situations that challenge their emotional health and require them to confront the unknown.

They must recognize their ability to deal effectively with threatening situations and accept the challenges these situations present. As well, they must learn to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to overcome their difficulties, both internal and external.

"Baby Help" focuses on Melissa, a seventeen-year-old mother living with her abusive boyfriend, their two-year-old daughter, and her boyfriend's mother. Melissa fell in love with Rudy at a young age, and having never felt wanted before, she developed a warped sense of what true love is all about. Rudy showers Melissa with affection, but eventually she finds his possessiveness frightening. As she gradually realizes that Rudy cannot control his anger and that she is a victim of abuse, she moves toward self-actualization.

For most of the story, Melissa is planning to marry Rudy rather than leave him. Slowly she begins to grasp what the future will hold for her and her baby if they remain with Rudy in their dysfunctional home.

Rudy gets drunk and hits Melissa, and time and time again she makes excuses for him.

But she finds it more and more difficult to cling to the image she has of a stable family for Cheyenne, one with two loving parents, and in her case, a doting grandmother. It takes Melissa a long time to redefine what she considers stability and to reevaluate her definition of love.

Melissa's unfamiliarity with love makes it difficult for her to give up her ideal, even when she recognizes that Rudy has a cruel streak and a violent temper. She constantly struggles to convince herself that because Rudy can be so sensitive and loving sometimes he truly does love her and will never abuse her again. Melissa is a victim in more ways than one. Reynolds gives enough background into her past to help readers recognize the cycle of abuse and understand why Melissa thinks and reasons the way she does. Melissa felt unloved and unwanted as a child, so when Rudy came along and showered her with attention, she fell easily into a trap. Rudy himself is in this same trap. His father was abusive and his mother put up with it. Irma tells Melissa that she must learn when to keep her mouth shut, and she must learn when to stay out of Rudy's way. But clearly Melissa is more intelligent than to follow that advice. Reynolds gives her the foresight to recognize the danger of remaining in this vicious cycle.

Melissa's situation is not unlike the situations of the other protagonists in this collection. They all face different crises, but they all find the resolve to break out of their unhealthy life and move toward actually obtaining the life they imagine. In "Only If You



Think So," Jason must break his pattern of failure and find the motivation it takes to succeed. In "For Ethan and Me," Christina must take a different path than she took in the past in order to make a better life for herself and her son in the future. In "What If," Paul must come to terms with the fatal accident that killed his best friend Gabe, and with the fact that he cannot change what happened. None of these protagonists can change what happened. But they can influence what is to come. Reynolds lets readers know that often times, one must feel trapped before recognizing the need to change directions.

For Melissa, this recognition comes gradually. Readers begin to wonder for a while if she will ever come to define herself as an abused partner, or if she will ever find the courage it takes to break out of the cycle and prevent herself from becoming another abused wife. But readers do understand that she is capable of reasoning. Reynolds gives her the common sense to pull away from Rudy and Irma, and she gives readers the knowledge that Melissa is much stronger than either one of them. The entire time she is making up stories to cover up the truth behind her bumps and bruises she constantly evaluating her situation. Rudy and Irma, it appears, never got that far. They remain constantly in turmoil. Reynolds allows readers to see Melissa's turmoil and to witness her change of attitude. Readers watch as she becomes more aware and more determined to better her situation.

Reynolds introduces another young mother in "For Ethan and Me." This story focuses on Christina Calderon, a character from *Too Soon for Jeff*, one of the earlier books in Reynolds' "Hamilton High" series and one that won praise from reviewers. In the first book, Christina becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son named Ethan. In "For Ethan and Me," the baby is just two years old when she gets pregnant again. Christina appears to be a responsible young adult in "For Ethan and Me," working hard to take care of her son, complete her schooling, and even teach other young adults about safe sex. But unfortunately, Christina neglected to practice what she preached. She knows that she can afford neither the financial nor the emotional strain of raising another child, so this time, she decides to have an abortion. The story centers around this difficult decision and the emotional process Christina must go through in order to accept her decision as the right choice.

Christina and Melissa are able to make wise decisions because they have been empowered by information. They are learning to be responsible parents, and they have access to the information to help them through the trials of raising a child while still children themselves. Reynolds gives her readers several messages here. She lets them know that however hopeless a situation may seem, it is possible to take control and obliterate the hopelessness. She makes readers aware that there is help available.

Reynolds discusses the social programs for abused partners and for teenage mothers, and emphasizes that there are caring people working for these programs who can offer guidance during difficult times.

Motherhood changed both Melissa and Christina in ways that led them to act more sensibly and responsibly than they had in the past. As soon as they accepted the



responsibility of being in control of others, they saw the necessity of taking control of themselves. This is also true for Jason in "Only If You Think So." Responsibility gives him the motivation he needs to help himself out of his slump. When the story begins, Jason already has the motivation to succeed in baseball, but he has given up on his dream because he considers himself an academic failure. He also has the ability to influence others and become a role model, but he is hostile to adult authority and school in general. Jason alters his attitude when he takes responsibility for others. He begins to care about others and himself.

This is also true for Josh in "Uncle Tweetie."

Eighty-seven-year-old Uncle Tweetie moves in to Josh's room just after his older brother moved away to college and Josh thought he would finally have his own space. This elderly man presented Josh with the challenge to keep a lid on his anger and resentment, but ended up teaching him important lessons about love and selflessness.

Teachers come in all shapes and sizes.

Uncle Tweetie is aging and uneducated.

Making matters worse, he has annoying habits that drive Josh crazy. Clearly, he presents a challenge for Josh to find something meaningful in what he considers to be a stifling situation. Cheyenne presents a similar challenge to Melissa in "Baby Help," but like Uncle Tweetie, she ends up teaching Melissa about love and selflessness. She also gives Melissa the motivation to recognize her own self worth. Caught in a trap with Rudy, Melissa has trouble protecting her own autonomy. But when Rudy threatens Cheyenne, it spurs her into action. She has no trouble recognizing that her daughter's independence and safety is worth protecting, and while fighting for Cheyenne, she ends up fighting for herself as well.

Beyond Dreams is about choices. It is about the power of will and determination. It is about accepting personal responsibility.

Melissa takes responsibility for herself when she decides to leave Rudy. Christina takes responsibility for herself when she decides to have an abortion. Jason takes responsibility for himself when he decides to succeed in school. Once these characters realize that they have choices, they take control of their lives and renew their hope for fulfilling their dreams. Jason realizes that he chose to fail in school, and he can similarly choose to succeed. Melissa realizes that she chose to remain with Rudy, and she can also choose to leave him.

In "What If," Paul finds himself in a situation where he did not decide to be.

When the story opens, Paul is lying in a hospital bed unconscious, the victim of a drunk driver who carelessly ran Paul and his best friend Gabe off the road. Gabe was killed instantly, and Paul finds himself looking back and wondering if there was anything he could have done to change what happened. Paul has no difficult decision to make other than to accept what happened, because nothing he can do can alter the path he must



take after the accident. He must come to terms with the his friend's death and the events that led up to it. He must choose to do this, rather than let the question of "what if" continue to torment him.

Paul can make the choice to put the past behind him and move on. Each of the characters in the collection finds an acceptable resolution to their problems, though readers know that they will have more problems in the future. Melissa will struggle being a young mother on her own, and Christina will have to come to terms with her abortion. Jason has a long way to go before he can graduate, and Paul will always have to deal with losing his best friend.

But people can choose to fail or to succeed; that seems to be Reynolds' message. She succeeds in conveying the complexity of her characters' situations without making them seem hopeless.

The odds seem insurmountable for some of the characters, yet they do manage to surmount them. Reynolds takes these teenagers through the process of identifying their problem, analyzing their choices, and coming to terms with what they need to do to better their lives. For Jason, it is a matter of finding his niche. His niche is baseball.

He has always excelled at it, but gave up any hope of playing baseball because he flunked out of Hamilton High. Fortunately for Jason, he has another chance. He is not handed that chance, but rather guided on how he can make it happen for himself.

Trinh, known by her English name Tammy to her friends at school, faces a dilemma that seems different from those of the other characters. She is struggling to come to terms with her split identity, trying to be American and speak English at school and trying to be Vietnamese and speak Vietnamese at home. The story appears to be about racism, but more adequately it is about the process of self-identity and selfacceptance that all teenagers experience.

Trinh has the added confusion of trying to reconcile two cultures and find a place in both. Trinh's American friends have trouble understanding the cultural mores of Vietnamese families, and her mother and brother demand a different kind of loyalty from Trinh than her American friends can comprehend.

As the story progresses, readers understand more about the conflict Trinh feels and receive crucial information about her past. Trinh has long been troubled by a disturbing dream that creeps slowly into her consciousness and gradually explodes an awful truth she must come to accept and understand. Like the other characters in the story, Trinh's determination to accept this challenge leads her to a fuller understanding of human nature and of her true self.

The characters in *Beyond Dreams* are all likeable individuals who have compassion and integrity. They have faith in human nature and they respect others, but they must learn how to have faith in themselves.



These characters truly wish to surmount their difficulties and better their lives, and though they remain stuck for a while, they manage to pull themselves up, change directions, and head down a more promising path. Reynolds' characters are on a journey, and they have come across some serious stumbling blocks. But this is typical of any journey to self-discovery. The travelers must learn to accept difficult decisions as challenges, and they must learn how to look out for themselves.



Topics for Discussion

1. What influences did Melissa have in her life that Irma did not have in hers that may have led to Melissa's ability to leave Rudy?
2. Why was it so easy for Melissa to mistake Rudy's obsessiveness as love and so difficult for her to understand it as abuse?
3. What effect do you believe the "innocent" racial epithets had on Trinh's perception of herself?
4. What do you see as a turning point for Josh in "Uncle Tweetie"?
5. Do you think Christina made the right decision in choosing to have an abortion? Why or why not?
6. Do you think Reynolds' primary purpose of writing these stories was to teach moral lessons?
7. Several of Reynolds' books have been the subject of banning attempts. What, if anything, do you consider controversial about *Beyond Dreams*?
8. Which character do you find most appealing and why? Identify the way that character learned to cope with his or her problem.
9. Discuss the notion of a "cycle of abuse" as it appears in "Baby Help." Do any of the other characters in the collection have to break a cycle?
10. Reynolds uses foreshadowing in "Baby Help" to hint at what may happen to Melissa in the future. Talk about foreshadowing as a literary device and discuss how Reynolds uses it in the other stories in her collection.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a persuasive paper in answer to one of the three questions Melissa must answer in her class on teen parenting.

Research teen pregnancy in the United States. What do you discover through your research?

2. Choose one of the stories and compare and contrast the adult influences on the teen character's life. Discuss which adults helped these characters and which ones hindered them.

3. Compare and contrast Melissa and Christina, who find themselves in similar situations. Discuss how motherhood has changed their attitudes about life and led them to take responsibility for themselves as well as their children. Do you know anyone your age who is a mother? Interview her and discuss your findings.

4. Choose one character and analyze the thought process that occurs in the character's mind as he or she comes to a resolution of the problem. When you are faced with a difficult choice or problem, how do you go about finding an answer? How do some of the people you know solve their problems?

5. Discuss the various ways Trinh feels torn between cultures. Are her thoughts unusual for children of immigrants?

Research Vietnam and the Vietnam War.

What can you say about the people, the culture, and the land?

6. Discuss the subtle ways people discriminate against others.

7. What is an epiphany? Do you think any of the characters in the collection have an epiphany? Who does and why?

8. Compare how America's culture treats its elderly with, for example, cultures in Mexico or Japan. What are some of the differences and/or similarities you find in how the elderly are treated and cared for?

9. What are some of the statistics on teen alcoholism? Why do you think teens drink alcohol? What part do you think their parents, peers, and society play in the consumption of alcohol?

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Related Titles

Beyond Dreams is the Reynolds' "Hamilton High" series. Christina appears in an earlier book in the series titled *Too Soon for Jeff*, a story in which Reynolds sheds light on the teen pregnancy issue from the young father's point of view. Another book in the series, *Detour for Emmy*, also deals with teen pregnancy. As ninth grader Emmy's pregnancy turns her world upside down, she learns to accept the consequences of her actions and take responsibility for her future. Her book *Love Rules* features a young lesbian who comes out to her family and friends and must learn to deal with the intolerance she encounters after she does so. *Baby Help*, published after *Beyond Dreams*, continues Melissa's story and turns it into a novel. In the novel, Melissa has moved to a group home, but returns to Rudy only to face more problems and more dangers.

For those interested in Melissa's story, another book that deals with an abusive boyfriend is "Past Forgiving," by Gloria Miklowitz. The protagonist of this book is a fifteen-year-old girl named Alexandra who must learn the danger in remaining with Cliff, her boyfriend who is obsessive and jealous, then eventually, physically abusive.

Chris Crutcher is another young adult novelist who focuses on teenagers dealing with crisis situations. Crutcher's *Athletic Shorts* is a collection of six short stories that feature characters from his novels and that center around the theme of finding courage to get through trying situations. His *Chinese Handcuffs* deals with teenage parenting, sexual abuse, and suicide; and his other titles such as *Crazy Horse Electric Game* and *Stotan!*

also introduce serious problems that challenge the main characters. Crutcher and Reynolds have both been criticized for covering disturbing and controversial subject matter. But both of these authors succeed in raising the consciousness of young adults by allowing them to read about these situations and understand how to deal with them.



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