

The Birds of Summer Short Guide

The Birds of Summer by Zilpha Keatley Snyder

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Birds of Summer Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

The *Birds of Summer* describes a family environment unfamiliar to many young adults. Summer, the daughter of an ex-hippie, lives in a trailer in the woods. Her free-spirited mother allows her more liberties than most fifteen-year-olds receive, and Summer faces few restrictions.

But Summer's lifestyle also demands adult responsibilities. She raises her younger sister and works to keep the family together, compensating for her mother's childishness and irresponsibility. These extraordinary responsibilities, combined with her lack of a father, leave Summer feeling very lonely as she confronts the onset of puberty and an increasing awareness of her sexuality.

In addition to following Summer's growth as a character, the novel provides a fast-paced plot. Summer's mother accidentally becomes involved with drug dealers, endangering herself and her family. Summer and her friend Nicky assume the responsibility for solving this dilemma.

Summer's upbringing differs vastly from that of most teenagers, but her more typical concerns make her easy to relate to. The book explores many conflicts relevant to young adults: maturity, responsibility, parent-adolescent relationships, friendship, sexuality, and loneliness. Snyder presents these issues with understanding and sophistication.

About the Author

Zilpha Keatley Snyder, born on May 11, 1927, in Lemoore, California, has spent most of her life in her native state. Growing up before the age of television, traveling infrequently, and watching few movies, the young Snyder depended on books for entertainment. A nearby library provided an inexhaustible supply of magic, adventure, and excitement. Snyder decided at the age of eight to become a writer, but many years passed before the publication of her first book, *Season of Ponies*.

Before her success as a writer, Snyder attended college, married, had children, and taught school in Berkeley, California, for nine years. Her former students have inspired many of Snyder's characters and plots, as have her own *Below the Root*, 1975 *And All Between*, 1975 *Until the Celebration*, 1977 *The Famous Stanley Kidnapping Case*, 1979 *A Fabulous Creature*, 1981 *Come On, Patsy*, 1982 *The Birds of Summer*, 1983 *Blair's Nightmare*, 1984 *And Condors Danced*, 1987 experiences, family, friends, pets, interests, and travels.

Three of her novels—*The Egypt Game*, *The Headless Cupid*, and *The Witches of Worm*—have been named Newbery Honor Books. *The Changeling* and *The Headless Cupid* have earned the Christopher Medal in recognition of exceptional quality.

Setting

Set in the 1980s, the novel tells the story of Summer McIntyre, who lives with her mother, Oriole, and her seven-year-old sister, Sparrow, in Alvarro, California. Oriole harbors romantic visions of getting back to nature and living the simple life, but she depends upon welfare to raise her family. The McIntyres live in a wooded area in a trailer that they rent from their friends and neighbors, the Fishers. The Fishers own some greenhouses in which they grow strawberries and tomatoes to sell in town. Oriole occasionally works for the Fishers but spends most of her time with whatever man she happens to be dating at the time; consequently, she devotes little attention to her children.

The California setting provides a crucial element to the story: the "laid back" atmosphere lets Oriole feel safe in allowing her children to roam freely. She believes they will survive, adapt, and grow up to be a part of the nonconformist community. But when a drifter enters their lives, their unquestioning trust and acceptance of him lead to their involvement with a drug gang.

Social Sensitivity

The *Birds of Summer* addresses complex and mature themes such as the single-parent family, drugs, and teenage sexuality with great sensitivity.

Summer and Nicky share a developing awareness of their sexuality, yet they decide to wait until they feel ready for romantic involvement. Although the teen-agers discuss sex openly and frequently, the issue is not exploited. By the end of the book Summer and Nicky become closer friends for having confronted their concerns in a mature and mutually respectful manner.

Some readers may find the novel's portrayal of a single-parent family disturbing and should be reminded that Snyder does not present Summer's situation as a typical example of such a family. Oriole's lack of responsibility stands in stark contrast to the increased needs her children experience as a result of not having a father. Her failure as a parent culminates with her involvement in a drug gang. Snyder clearly depicts the negative aspects of drugs, and Oriole pays dearly for her poor judgment. Teachers will want to assure students that many single-parent homes do not end in such catastrophe and that parents cannot always be blamed for their misfortunes.

Literary Qualities

Snyder presents important and sensitive themes in the context of a suspenseful story. Most readers will find themselves intrigued by the turns of the plot and stimulated by the challenges the McIntyres present to standard images of the family unit.

The characters' names symbolize their personalities. While Oriole and Sparrow possess free spirits, Summer offers light, growth, and hope to a family lacking responsible parental guidance. Summer's letter to Mr. Pardell at the end of the novel is a symbol of hope, demonstrating that she has begun to replace her intense longing for her father with more beneficial relationships.

Aside from the suspenseful conflict with the drug dealers, secondary confrontations add interest. Early in the book, Snyder introduces several conflicts that are not resolved until the end.

For example, Summer devises a way to bring Sparrow along when she moves to Connecticut with the Olivers. This foreshadows Summer's arrangements for Sparrow's welfare, but the plan is not actually revealed until the end of the novel. Snyder's well-developed plot, believable characters, and flowing, descriptive language provide an absorbing narrative.



Themes and Characters

Fifteen-year-old Summer learns a great deal about life as she confronts the problems of impending adulthood. She has trouble understanding her nonconformist mother and misses her absentee father, to whom she frequently writes letters. Having nowhere to send these letters, Summer simply collects them.

Her male companion Nicky no longer enjoys their childhood games and now desires her sexually.

Oriole will never be ready for motherhood. Summer and Sparrow have different fathers, neither of whom has maintained contact with the family, and men continue to come in and out of Oriole's life frequently. Nevertheless, she dedicates all of her time to whomever she happens to love at the moment.

During the course of the novel her misplaced loyalties fall upon a drug dealer, and the Fishers and Oriole begin to grow marijuana in the greenhouses. In the end, Oriole realizes that her lack of responsibility has cost her a closeness with her children that can never be recaptured.

Sparrow shares many of her mother's carefree qualities, seeing the good in things and rarely questioning the bad.

This naivete increases the need for Summer to watch out for Sparrow as well as for her mother. Sparrow demonstrates her active imagination when she creates an imaginary friend to replace Marina Fisher, who suddenly disappears from her life. Her search for Marina, who she feels certain still lives at home, leads to the climactic Shootout at the Fishers' house.

The Fishers have been Oriole's friends since the 1960s when they lived together in a commune. Nicky Fisher, their son, wants to explore his new sexual awareness with Summer, but the two young adults decide not to rush into a physical relationship and instead concentrate on ridding their families of the intruding drug dealers.

Confused by the increasingly complex issues surrounding her, Summer finds both relief and further complications in her relationships with her wealthy employers, the Olivers, and her English teacher, Mr. Pardell.

Both the Olivers and the Pardells understand Summer's problems and offer to help. The Olivers plan to move to Connecticut, and offer to take Summer with them as their housekeeper. This offers Summer an opportunity to escape her troubles, but also demands that she make an important decision to leave her family and responsibilities. Mr. Pardell reads one of her letters to her father after she accidentally turns it in to him.

He probably learns more about Summer from her writing than she knows about herself. Wishing to help, he hires Summer to clean his house while his wife is in the hospital.



Both the Olivers and the Pardells act as counselors for Summer, offering adult perspectives that her mother lacks.

Many themes pervade this novel.

Summer's unorthodox mother provides an unusual look at the parent-child relationship. The book also examines how single-parent families affect adolescents. Summer and Nicky come to terms with their heightened sexuality, and they also confront the drug dealers, who represent one of today's major societal problems.

A subtler theme centers on the positive and negative aspects of imagination.

Summer never knew her father, yet she has created an image of him and actually communicates with this image through the letters she writes. Similarly, Sparrow recreates her lost friend Marina. The different effects of these imaginative indulgences illustrate both the helpful and the detrimental aspects of emotional compensation.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title *The Birds of Summer*?
2. Why does Summer wish to get away from Alvarro and experience life on her own?
3. How do Summer and Sparrow each cope with their loneliness?
4. Do Summer's letters effectively ease the pain she feels for not having a father? Why or why not?
5. Summer, Sparrow, and Nicky all undergo some frightening experiences.

How do you think these experiences will affect them in later years?

6. Is it good to imagine situations, as Sparrow does, that make life seem less cruel and bleak?
7. Why do you think Oriole is so irresponsible as a mother?
8. How do the Olivers attempt to solve Summer and Sparrow's problems? What do you think of the solutions they offer?
9. Do you agree or disagree with Summer's final decision concerning Sparrow?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does the single-parent family structure affect Summer and Sparrow?

How do the McIntyres compare with single-parent families you know?

2. Discuss Summer's method of compensating for not having a father. Has Summer found a positive solution to her problem or is it ultimately harmful?

3. Discuss the significance of Summer's letter to Alan. How does her realization that she will never meet her father signify her emotional growth?

4. Do you feel that the growing of marijuana is a suitable subject for a young adult novel? What image does this story project of drug dealers and drug users? Do you agree with that portrayal?

5. Choose your favorite adult character in the book and explain why you particularly like that character.

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 28. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982. Contains a biographical sketch and much information from Snyder about her novels. A much briefer entry is available in volume 1 of the same series.

Gunton, Sharon R., ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 17. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. Contains excerpts from reviews of *The Birds of Summer*.

Related Titles

The Birds of Summer is Snyder's second book dealing with a singleparent family. The Witches of Worm tells of a young girl often left alone by a mother who spends all of her time with her boyfriends and on vacations. The daughter passes the time by exorcising imaginary witches from her cat. The story is about growing up and reviving old friendships. Most of Snyder's books feature strong female adolescent characters fending for themselves and often bearing responsibility for other family members.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996