

Bizou Short Guide

Bizou by Norma Klein

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Overview

Bizou is the story of two weeks in the life of Eliane, a thirteen-year-old girl whose American mother is a freespirted black fashion model in Paris, and whose deceased father was a French photojournalist Bizou, Eliane's nickname, relates in first-person narrative the events and her thoughts during this brief, but fateful period.

The novel opens as Bizou and her mother, Tranquility, travel from their home in Paris to the United States.

Although her mother is an American, Bizou has never been to America and has never met any of her mother's family. On the plane, they get to know Nicholas, their medical student seatmate, who agrees to show them the sights in New York City. When TranPhoto of Norma Klein by Matthew Miles.

quility suddenly disappears on their third day in New York, Nicholas becomes Bizou's reluctant caretaker. The rest of the story centers on this unlikely duo's search for Tranquility's family or friends and the reunion that restores broken relationships.

About the Author

Norma Klein was born May 1938, in New York City and lived there until her death on April 25, 1989.

Klein's father, Emanuel Klein, was a Freudian psychoanalyst; her mother, Sadie Frankel Klein, was an accomplished tennis player; and her younger brother, Victor, became a social worker. The author described her parents as "nonreligious Jews, politically left-wing, intellectual."

From age three to thirteen, Klein attended the Dalton School in New York and graduated from Elizabeth Irwin High School in 1956. She went to Cornell University for one year, then to Barnard College where she received her B.A. in Russian in 1960, achieving cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa distinctions. She earned her master's degree in Slavic languages from Columbia University in 1963. She stated that she studied Russian because of her love for the short stories of Anton Chekhov, adding that if she were on a deserted island and could have the works of only two authors, she would pick Chekhov and Jane Austen.

Klein married Erwin Fleissner, a molecular biologist, on July 27, 1963.

They had two daughters, Jennifer Luise (Jenny), born 1967, and Katherine Nicole (Katie), born 1970. After her marriage, Klein changed her plans to study for a Ph.D. and decided to write.

Klein's prolific writing career, which began at age nineteen when one of her short stories was first published, spanned more than two decades. She wrote fiction, verse, and short stories for children, adolescents, and adults. In 1978, *School Library Journal* included Klein's *Love Is One of the Choices* in its Best Books of the Year list. *Girls Can Do Anything* was selected for Child Study Association of America's Children's Books of the Year and as a Junior Literary Guild selection. *Dinosaur's Housewarming Party*, another of her children's books, was also named a Junior Literary Guild selection. Klein's adult short stories have been selected to appear in the 1963, 1965, and 1983 editions of *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, as well as the 1969 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*.

Setting

Although the characters go from one locale to another throughout the story, the various settings are not a dominant element in this contemporary (1980s) chronicle. The people, events, and thoughts during the journey are the significant ingredients.

At the start, Bizou and her mother travel from Paris to New York City, where they spend two days sightseeing with Nicholas. After Tranquility's disappearance, Bizou and Nicholas drive to Vermont to visit his girlfriend and to make plans for finding Bizou's mother or family. They then drive to Washington, D.C. to contact Mr. Haynes who is the father of one of Bizou's former schoolmates and who works for the U.S. State Department.

Their final stop on the search for information about Tranquility, her family, or her friends is Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, Tranquility's hometown.

Social Sensitivity

Klein's books rank second behind Judy Blume's in censorship attempts.

She has said that the censorship issue is viewed more conservatively now than in the early days of her career, and that she described the world as it is in her realistic books for teen-agers.

It is true that her writing speaks clearly and directly in their own language to the concerns of young adults.

The focus of *Bizou* is the thoughts and emotions of the characters, especially Bizou and her mother, as they try to cope with the cultural and sociological forces that affect their lives.

The controversial cultural and sociological issues include child abandonment, immature parenting, extramarital sex, racial bias, illegitimate birth and adoption, adolescent sexual behavior, and multicultural relationships. Even though the target audience may enjoy reading *Bizou*, the treatment of these issues lacks depth and the shallow, shotgun presentation provides a basis for objections by parents and teachers.



Literary Qualities

This book explores nontraditional family situations and relationships and clearly depicts their negative as well as positive aspects. Klein demonstrates how conflicting issues can complicate parents' and teen-agers' attempts to choose the correct course of action.

Through Bizou, Klein speaks to her readers with wit, understanding, and compassion. The protagonist's personal actions and feelings—about sexuality, sex roles and sexual behavior, peer relations, and family ties—are recorded in simple, sincere language.

The structure of the dialogue is contemporary and conversational, which enhances the narrative.

Some of the subplots are believable, but the major plot seems unrealistic.

Bizou's situation is not presented as typical, and she does not show the typical reactions of a teen-aged girl.

Her feelings for her mother are superficially developed and Tranquility's lack of responsibility is not seriously addressed. Her abandonment of her daughter, her sudden reappearance, and her instantaneous acceptance into the family fold lacks credibility.

Themes and Characters

The author addresses several themes in this short novel: multicultural marriages and friendships, family ties, single parenthood, sexuality and sexual behavior, race discrimination, and child abandonment. However, which of the themes are major and which are minor is unclear. The novel's themes develop through Bizou's day-to-day perspectives. Though this technique is often employed successfully, the author's treatment of themes in this book does not move the reader beyond the surface of the narration.

The central, most well-developed character in this book is Eliane, nicknamed Bizou. Her personality is revealed in her narration of the story.

The thirteen-year-old daughter of a black fashion model and a white photojournalist, Bizou shows herself to be strong, determined, and resourceful in the face of her problems.

Bizou's family are important to the evolution of the story. Her mother, Tranquility, is a tall, thin, black woman who left home for Paris when she was eighteen and married when she was nineteen. Her liberal attitudes are the cause of many of the story's conflicts. Beal Roberts is Bizou's grandfather. A retired doctor, he is the "strong, silent type." Although Bizou and Duff do not know it, Duff Pyne, sixteen, is Bizou's half-brother. His birth mother is Tranquility; his adopted mother is Anita, Tranquility's best friend since childhood. Mr. Beal, Duff, and Anita are slightly, but believably, drawn characters. Their presence supports the novel's themes and heightens the reader's interest. Tranquility, however, is sketchily developed and this affects the plausibility of the story.

Nicholas Berend is the other prominent character. He is a twenty-three-year-old medical student who befriends Bizou and Tranquility. Nicholas is short, handsome, and white. He has spent a year abroad and shows himself to be a responsible, caring young man.



Topics for Discussion

1. Which character in the book is the most believable? Why?
2. Bizou undergoes a frightening experience. How does she react? Is this realistic? Do you think this will affect her in later years? How?
3. Why do Bizou and Tranquility travel to America? Why does Tranquility leave Bizou in New York? What is she hoping for? Does the story give you evidence that she achieved it?
4. Describe Bizou's feelings about her mother before, during, and after Tranquility's disappearance. What do you think of Tranquility as a mother? What influences your opinion?
5. Compare and contrast the attitudes of the other characters toward Tranquility. Do each of them change their opinions during the course of the story? How? Why?
6. Bizou appears to be a relatively independent young person, but the sense of belonging is important to her.

In what ways does she want to be like others, and in what ways is she willing to be different? Do you share her attitudes?

7. How does Bizou show her rejection to her mother's actions? What did she want to happen? What was the result? Can you think of other ways she might have accomplished her goal?
8. Tranquility went to France to escape race discrimination, but racism is not the only problem in this novel.

What other conflicts confront Bizou, Tranquility, Nicholas, Grandpa, Anita, Duff?

9. There are several parent-child relationships in this book. What is your opinion of each? Using these relationships, give specific examples of positive and negative traits of the parents.
10. Imagine what Grandpa's visit to Paris would be like. What do you think his reaction will be to Nana? What will be her reaction to him? What things will he find to be different in France?

What things will be the same?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Bizou was written in the early 1980s. Discuss the elements you believe to be typical social concerns of the 1980s and those which are concerns now.
2. At the beginning of the story, Bizou quotes her mother as saying, "knowing what your roots are is important." Discuss this idea as it applies to the various characters in the novel's end.
3. Investigate your own "roots" and draw a family tree showing several generations.
4. Bizou wants to be a photojournalist like her father, not a model like her mother. Nicholas and Duff plan to be medical doctors. Investigate medicine, modeling, and/or photojournalism as careers. What do doctors, models, and photojournalists do? What type of training is required for these careers?

Who are some famous people who have pursued these careers?

5. Bizou is Eliane's nickname that was given to her by her father. Research famous people and people you know with nicknames. How did they get these nicknames? Did having a nickname affect them in any way? Did they feel the effect was positive or negative?
6. A Train for Jane is a collection of Klein's verse. Girls Can Do Anything is one of her books for children. Using these two works, write a paper on her opinions about women and how these opinions are manifested in Bizou.
7. Read Mom, the Wolf Man and Me, another of Klein's works. Discuss the similarities and differences of Bizou and this novel.
8. Read the author's articles on censorship. Write a paper discussing this issue from your point of view and the opposing point of view.



For Further Reference

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Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, 2d edition.

New York: St. Martin's, 1983: 438439. A brief biographical sketch and analytical comments about Klein's major books is supplemented with a long list of her published works.

Klein, Norma. In *Authors & Artists 2* (1988): 139-150. In this twelve-page article, the author describes her thoughts and feelings about her writing, her growing up, and her relationships. Also included are biographical facts, awards, and list of writings.

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———. "Books to Help Kids Deal with Difficult Times." *School Library Media Quarterly* (Spring 1987): 161-164. This is a speech delivered in 1986 to the American Association of School Librarians. In it the author discusses her writing and her thoughts on censorship.

———. "Growing Up Human: The Case of Sexuality in Children's Books."

Children's Literature in Education (Summer 1977): 80-84. The author gives her opinions concerning the controversy of sexuality in books written for young people.

———. "Some Thoughts on Censorship: An Author Symposium." *Top of the News* 39,2 (Winter 1983): 137-153. In this article the author reports on her interviews with several young adult book writers discussing their feelings about censorship. Included are Brancato, Blume, Scoppettone, Rees, and Miles.

Phy, Allene Stuart. *Presenting Norma Klein*. Boston: Twayne, 1988. This entire book presents a critical study of the author's writings.

Related Titles/Adaptations

In *It's Not What You Expect*, fourteen-year-old twins, Oliver and Carla, must cope with their father's absence when he leaves the family to go to New York City to write a book. *Angel Face* is a tragic story of a boy who must learn to live without his mother. The protagonist, Jason, is not doing well in his school life or love life because his family is falling apart. Other books with male protagonists are *Going Backwards* and *No More Saturday Nights*.

Both stories portray young men with life-changing problems. *Love Is One of the Choices* and *Older Men* have female main characters who make adult decisions while they are still teen-agers.

There have been three adaptations of Klein's work: "Mom, the Wolf Man and Me" (record or cassette; Caedmon, 1977), *Mom, the Wolfman and Me* (film; Time-Life Productions, 1979), and "Confessions of an Only Child" (cassette; Caedmon, 1977).



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