

# Blues for Silk Garcia Short Guide

## Blues for Silk Garcia by Erika Tamar

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## Overview

There are many questions haunting Linda Ann Garcia, the talented but troubled heroine of this book. Linda's questions center on a mystery man from her past, the father she has never known, the late jazz genius Silk Garcia.

Blues for Silk Garcia is a novel which asks: Is there value in recovering a usable past? With this story, Tamar suggests there is, and that children ought to know the gifts—and the burdens—heredity bestows.

Other questions the author raises concern obligations artists have to nurture their talent, but at what cost?

When the cost involves pain for other people, Tamar draws a line. Blues for Silk Garcia exposes a seamy underside, the all-too-frequent phenomenon that accompanies the glitter of professional jazz. Readers may appreciate the gritty realism, too, in the author's descriptions of life in high school for social outcasts.

Tamar creates believable characters with important inner conflicts, and the wrestling her characters do with these conflicts sustains reader interest. While we empathize with Linda Ann, we learn, as does she, that romantic delusions are no substitute for the freedom truth enables.

Readers who have lost a parent before having had the chance to know that parent may find this novel has a special appeal.

## About the Author

Erika Tamar was born in Vienna, Austria, on June 10, 1934. The daughter of a doctor and a housewife, Tamar is the mother of three and lives now in New York City. She has worked as a casting director for TV serials, a freelance writer, an actress and a director of community theater. A member of the Author's Guild and Society of Children's Bookwriters, she has won several awards for her fiction for young adults.

Tamar and her older brother were refugees from the Nazis when she and he came to the United States in 1939 with a B'nai B'rith rescue effort. She holds "the movies" responsible for her subsequent Americanization.

Tamar majored in English at New York University. She says she has been a reader and storyteller for as long as she can recall. The young adult novels her children brought home inspired her current career; along with reader and storyteller, Tamar is now pleased to call herself a writer. Tamar says that her fiction is quasi-autobiographical.

For instance, *Blues for Silk Garcia* grew from a love of jazz and from her daughter's facility with classical guitar.

## Setting

New York City provides the geographical locale for Linda Ann's quest, as chronicled by Tamar. Set in the present, the story seems plausible although an occasional reference to "popular" song lyrics does date the text somewhat. Linda Ann lives with her mother, a cosmetics-counter saleswoman, in a Long Island apartment above Varian's Gifts and Imports. Her best buddy in school, Jeff Breslow, lives in the "lushly landscaped world of Lloyd Hill," a nearby, upscale subdivision in the North Bay community.



## Social Sensitivity

There is considerable emphasis, in this novel, on empathy and on fostering relationships that are supportive, not exploitive. Tamar stresses the necessity of balance for harmonious community, and concedes that while opposites often attract, compatibility reigns.

Just as improvisational jazz is born of assonance and dissonance, the conflicts and convergences in this narrative create a "complete" composition.

With her penchant for realistic portrayal of young adult experience, Tamar addresses sensitive topics in *Blues for Silk Garcia*. On one occasion, Linda Ann and her friends obtain fake I.D.s. They visit a jazz club, and while there, drink alcohol, though not to excess. At another juncture, the text implies that Linda and Michael have sex.

Although the expression of these behaviors may concern some readers, it does lend the text a sense of authenticity.

Authentic, too, is the representation of social deviance, or pathology, through the slowly-unfurled depiction of Silk Garcia. And while Tamar is careful to neither condemn nor condone Silk's deeds, she skillfully leads readers to a place of greater understanding of those deeds.

## Literary Qualities

The first and last paragraph—the prologue and epilogue—are identical, framing the story, and creating a musical effect of refrain. Taken together, this pro-epilogue suggests the intimate relationship of what follows and what comes before. Another example of balance, or symmetry, as a premier quality of this book is the care taken to legitimize both scientific and artistic ways of knowing. Tamar implies that science and art in tandem help us make sense of ourselves and the world around us.

Scientist extraordinaire, Jeff Breslow, serves as a foil for Linda Ann. This "foil" function helps readers sharpen their perception of the central character, her flaws, her gifts, and her attributes.

Although Tamar does not allude overtly to other written works, her narrative draws, covertly, upon a deepening literary tradition of writing about jazz and jazz musicians. For example, *Blues for Silk Garcia* treats many of the same themes addressed in the James Baldwin short story, "Sonny's Blues."



## Themes and Characters

Linda Ann and Jeff enjoy the use of the city's mass transit system, and they consider their relative mobility, at a young age, a true perk. Although she moves through the boroughs of New York with ease, Linda Ann spends most of her time at school, at home or with Jeff, practicing her guitar while he breeds and feeds parakeets. Jeff has a passion for genetic research of the scientific sort; Linda's own research in genetics—and genealogy—begins with the news that her father has died.

Silk Garcia's death is the point of departure for this narrative. It also steels Linda Ann's resolve to piece together the story of his life. Along the way, Linda begins to turn her inquiry inward, to examine her own motivation and behavior. Linda Ann unearths disturbing truths about her "genius" father: that he was a thief, a junkie, and a sociopath who used people. She wonders: If perfect pitch is hereditary, might not character flaws be, too?

Could it be that she is, in fact, a "taker," just like Silk? Eventually, Linda Ann concludes that genetics cannot account for everything, that she is far from foreordained to repeat her father's embattled life. By the novel's end, Linda Ann has newfound respect for herself, for personal choice, and, not incidentally, for her mother.

Tamar endows her protagonist with a compulsive personality. Linda Ann is obsessed with learning the details of her father's life, obsessed with perfecting her musical talent, obsessed with her new "golden boy" boyfriend. These compulsive behaviors are scrutinized in this text, and one wonders if Tamar is suggesting Linda's temperament typifies that of most artists?

Jeff Breslow's character serves as a counterpoint to Linda Ann's, with his patience, and his penchant for careful observation. Although they are very different people, Jeff and Linda complement each other, and they get on well—until Michael Harrison comes along.

Michael is a popular senior and member of the "in" crowd at school.

He diverts Linda Ann's attention completely when they meet at the Guitar Institute. At first, Linda is flattered by Michael's apparent devotion to her, then she becomes consumed with reckless infatuation. Michael does not, however, share Linda's drive to be the best she can be, and their friendship ends badly when he accuses her of using him.

Linda Ann's involvement with Michael helps her refine her identity, as does meeting Ray Bronson, a lifelong friend of her father's. Big Ray Bronson is a successful jazz musician who, with Linda's mother, finally helps Linda stop feeling sorry for herself. As *Blues for Silk Garcia* ends, it is Ray who reminds Linda that, whatever else her dad may have been, he was still a man: "Of course he had feelings, but he couldn't . . . connect . . . with anyone."





Linda, he was a man in a cage. The only way he could express anything was through his music." With their relationship on the mend, both Linda and her mother move forward, looking toward fresh starts and new arrangements.

In many ways, *Blues for Silk Garcia* pays tribute to a seemingly undeserving scoundrel who, nonetheless, once gave the gift of life. Even after death, Silk continues to enrich lives through his music and, indirectly, through the music his daughter makes.

The primary conflict in this story is the internal struggle of its central character to come to grips with some difficult truths about her past. Linda Ann must cast aside comforting but false assumptions, and reckon with feeling the loss of a father who was not long in her life. Moreover, she must let go of the ideal father-figure she has heretofore imagined, an apparition bearing little resemblance to the real man.

The theme of *Blues for Silk Garcia* emerges with Linda Ann's attempts to open the once-sealed door to her past.

Tamar implies that knowledge of the truth, however painful, is infinitely preferable to revering false idols. She reminds readers that interest in genetic inheritance is a normal, even healthy, aspect of adolescent development.

Self-discovery lies at the heart of Linda Ann's quest. That she concludes the self is more than the sum of its parts is evident when she says, "I'm me, not Silk Garcia's kid. There was a time when my dream of him gave me confidence when I needed it most. I guess the reality serves as a demonstration of everything I don't want to be. But I don't think about him anymore."

Tamar generates suspense for readers by forestalling Linda Ann's discovery of Silk's most heinous moral transgression. As the point of highest interest and emotional pitch, this, then, becomes the climax, or turning point of her narrative. She complicates the basic plot with many minor conflicts, a bevy of dilemmas without easy answers.

Linda Ann loses her innocence in more ways than one; she also admits, finally, that she, too, has flaws.

# Topics for Discussion

1. What prompts Linda Ann to look for Big Ray Bronson? Why does she feel the need to question him?
2. How does Linda's relationship with her mother change during the course of this story?
3. What typically artistic characteristics does Linda Ann possess? Contrast these traits with those of her friend, Jeff Breslow.
4. Comment on the significance of the title of this novel.
5. Describe the central conflict in *Blues for Silk Garcia*. What is its relationship to the theme, or themes?
6. What insights, if any, does this novel provide about performance?  
Sociopathology? Jazz?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Discuss the value of knowing one's heritage, or why it is important for Linda Ann to "recover a usable past."
2. Are Linda's delusions about her father healthy or unhealthy? Justify your response.
3. Explain how Michael Harrison helps Linda better understand her own identity and her genetic inheritance.
4. Identify specific choices Tamar makes that contribute to the authenticity of this story.
5. How does Jeff Breslow function as a "foil" for Linda Ann? Locate passages in the text to support this contention.

## For Further Reference

The following reviews provide varied and thoughtful readings of *Blues* for Silk Garcia.

Booklist 79 (August 1983): 1468. "Erika Tamar intricately weaves together the story of Linda's search for her father's personality with her first romance and, in the process, gives readers a full-blown memorable heroine capable of growth and change."

Kirkus Reviews 51 (March 1, 1983): 251.

A largely laudatory review with emphasis on the author's care in craft.

Publishers Weekly 223 (March 11, 1983): 86. "Linda comes to realize that she has been using her dream of her father as a crutch, and that she's a lot more than just 'Silk Garcia's daughter.' Tamar's debut is well-plotted and quite realistic; it's a sensitive and moving story."

School Library Journal 29 (May 1983): 86.

While Linda Wicher considers the novel generally successful, she argues Tamar's turns of plot are "somewhat predictable."



## Related Titles

In *Good-bye Glamour Girl*, Tamar again explores a young woman's need to recover a usable past while paradoxically distancing herself from that past, a heritage of horror, the horror of the Holocaust. As with *Blues for Silk Garcia*, *Good-bye Glamour Girl* is loosely autobiographical; it begins with the heroine's arrival in New York and includes her "Americanization" via the movies.

*Journey* by Patricia MacLachlan and Suzanne Newton's *M. V. Sexton Speaking* are two young adult novels thematically similar to *Blues for Silk Garcia*. All address the premature death of a female protagonist's parent(s), and this protagonist's struggle to come to terms with that loss.

Though perhaps written for a slightly more mature audience, Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* is a moving testament to the real, raw world of professional improvisational jazz. While *Blues for Silk Garcia* exposes the seamy underside of one fictitious musician's life, Ondaatje's novel provides a fuller, more probing examination of yet another jazz musician's character.

# Copyright Information

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