

But in the Fall I'm Leaving Short Guide

But in the Fall I'm Leaving by Ann Rinaldi

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Overview

While *But in the Fall I'm Leaving* primarily examines the effects of divorce on a family, most specifically on a girl who yearns for a real mother in her life, it also centers on a mystery. Brianna (Brie) McQuade knows that there is something unusual about her father's relationship to Miss Emily, but she does not know how the rich older woman is connected to her own life.

When she is forced to work for Miss Emily in compensation for having spray painted her house, Brie gets to know the person who she eventually discovers is her grandmother. Why this information has been hidden from Brie, in part, propels the plot of the novel.

Also important to the plot is the question of whether or not Brianna will leave her father and move in with her mother. "But in the Fall I'm Leaving" is the statement Brianna says to herself as she tries to piece together the meaning of her place in the family and in the community.

At the center of the novel is an even greater question: the meaning of human existence. Rinaldi, through Brianna and her priest brother, Kevin, explores what happens to human beings when they are overcome by despair. She reveals how religion and commitment to moral values can give meaning and solace to people. Rinaldi paints a very realistic picture of both weaknesses and strengths in even the most "seemingly" upright community members. In *But in the Fall I'm Leaving* she shows the dark side of life: a mother who ravages her daughter with the truth; a grandmother who helped devastate a town through economic buyout; and an important official who frequents places of prostitution. She also offers moral answers: There are ways one can be good to a peer, even if that peer has been nothing but trouble.

There are good things one can do in the world. There are fights to be fought and to be won, even though there is often a price for winning. A human being can make the world a better place.

About the Author

Ann (Feis) Rinaldi was born on August 27, 1934, in New York City.

She attended high school in New Brunswick, New Jersey. She married Ronald Rinaldi in 1960, with whom she has two children, a boy and a girl. A writer since her youth, Rinaldi created stories even while she was, as she states, "house bound" with her babies.

Her first published young adult novel, *Term Paper*, began as a ten-thousandword short story about a fourteen-yearold protagonist. That, plus her next two novels, fall under the category of contemporary realistic fiction. The works deal with such modern issues as peer pressure, teen dating, birth control, and a girl's search for identity.

When Rinaldi completed *But in the Fall I'm Leaving*, a moving story about a fourteen-year-old girl who must choose between living with her busy newspaperman father or a mother she has never really known, Rinaldi herself made a choice: She began writing historical fiction. She has, in her successive novels, focused primarily on teenage protagonists living during the American Revolution. In her acknowledgement remarks to *Time Enough for Drums* and *Wolf by the Ears*, Rinaldi credits her "addiction" to American history to her son, Ron, an American history buff; yet the author's own profession lends itself to American studies.

Since 1970 Rinaldi has worked as a columnist for the Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper, *The Trentonian* and has herself been awarded first prize in New Jersey Press Awards. When Rinaldi covered the bicentennial events in Trenton and Princeton, she embarked on her long term involvement in "living" history through re-enactments.

During the writing of *Time Enough for Drums*, a novel about a fifteen-year-old girl who sees her family and her hometown of Trenton torn apart by fighting, Rinaldi was spending several weekends with her family participating in battle scene re-enactments and encampments. *Time Enough for Drums* and *A Break with Charity* were named Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association.

Because Rinaldi writes about "real life as I know it," her vision is often complex and, at times, ambiguous: Problems may not have only one right answer. Decisions can involve loss as well as gain. Her fiction asks probing questions about one's place in family, about one's feelings for oneself, about one's relationship to the past.

Setting

The story begins with Brianna staring across the street at Miss Emily's three-story gabled house in the historic district of Waltham, New Jersey. With its Florida room, its "bookcases gleaming with richly bound volumes, flowered sofas strewn with pillows, gleaming antiques, and rich draperies," the house itself is one of the primary settings in the novel. For Brianna the house is part of the mystery surrounding Miss Emily. It also stands in direct contrast to her brother's old house in downtown Newark. Both these houses represent, in some sense, choices Brianna confronts about how one is to deal with materialism. Her brother, a street priest who moved to Newark to help unwed mothers, represents one very strong force in Brianna's life.

Miss Emily, at least at first, with her charity groups and theater guild, represents another way of making life livable.

When Brie is not with her brother, or at Miss Emily's, or at school, she is usually in her home, described by Rinaldi as "a pleasant Dutch colonial with a center hall and patio and a jalousied sun porch." Often, she is sequestered in some room away from her father or brother who have a habit of asking her to disappear when important things have to be discussed. In this respect, settings, in this novel, also represent other people's places where Brianna is allowed. Brie seems to have no place of her own, unless you could call that place her room. But then, too, the room suggests the idea of Brianna not being there: It is filled with images of her mother, objectifications of Brianna's own desire to be in her mother's home.

Brie's room has also stood as the divider between the girl and her father.

When the story opens, Mr. McQuade has not come into Brianna's room for over a year. The reader assumes much of this to do with the fact that the man feels hurt when he enters a room which so excludes him in preference for his ex-wife.

Other than these places, Brianna also frequents both the very rich and very poor areas with her father's girlfriend, Amanda. The latter, assisted by Brie's father, is building a restaurant in the seedy part of Waltham, a town "on the back road to the shore," which, thanks in part to Miss Emily, has become a tourist spot.



Social Sensitivity

But in the Fall I'm Leaving can serve as a springboard for students to discuss how they perceive good living and good deeds. There are, though, some potential hazards which might arise during a discussion of Rinaldi's text.

Kevin's unfailing self-sacrifice is not often seen—at least by the narrator—in the most altruistic of lights. Kevin himself admits that his desire to immerse himself in poverty, when he does have money and can oversee a suburban parish, stems from his response to his grandmother's past. And Brianna has a clear distaste for Kevin's impoverished home. In this sense, point of view is primarily upper-middle class: There is an element of snobbishness in the work.

While But in the Fall I'm Leaving does tend to represent a predominantly white middle- and upper-middle-class point of view, there is value in its presentation. The majority of the characters seem to have a need to confront the effect of money on their lives. They are afraid of being corrupted by money; they know that money can mean power and can, consequently, mean power abused. They also know or come to realize that money, in the right hands, can do real good. Characters are also constantly probing what they are doing with their lives and what that means to others.

Because But in the Fall I'm Leaving is a modern text there are other issues which may need to be handled carefully. Nastasha, a graduate student who lives with Brianna's grandmother, confesses to the girl that she is pregnant. One of the subplots involves her dealing with pregnancy: She decides to have (and keep) the child. Miss Emily ultimately affords Nastasha the opportunity to keep the baby. The ethical implications of this pregnancy, while dealt with in a minor way, are treated in the novel. The reader is to see such a pregnancy as foolish; but Rinaldi also makes the reader feel for Nastasha. By the end of the novel, one wants her to have a child. One might construe this ending as an implicit authorial suggestion that abortion or adoption are less than satisfactory choices. That the writer implies such a moral stance may be problematic.

However, since the issue is treated with sensitivity, and this is a modern text, it is well worth considering.

There are finally, other issues which are problematic and not as easy to answer in terms of how a teacher might handle discussion. Towards the end of the novel, Brianna, having learned her history in the most brutal of ways, descends into what she calls a "black hole." She has horrible nightmares; she hallucinates and runs a high fever. She says to her brother: "The black hole, Kev. I keep slipping into it. One of these times I'm not gonna be able to get out." To some degree, Brianna is saved when her brother, the priest, stands over her and makes the sign of the cross, saying, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with the . . ."; he blesses her over and over and causes the "demons" inside of Brianna to be "vanquished."



It is quite possible that this kind of religiousness in the novel might offend readers or their parents (non-Christian and Christian) who wish matters of religion to remain outside the domain of the secular education. Since matters concerning the soul's salvation are not treated in an allegorical and symbolic framework nor presented in a universal light, there is validity for such a concern. Brianna's religion is presented in the light of her own feelings and her search for self in the world. She is at an age when everything comes under scrutiny; and everything, including organized religion, comes up short.

Her father does not go to communion because, as Brianna states, he is "living in sin with Amanda." But Brianna looks at sin and thinks her mother, who walked away, should be blamed.

On one level, Brianna loves the "music and incense" of religion; yet she states "if you delved beneath the surface you could go crazy." She has trouble with rules—her father's, her religion's. In this sense Brianna's ambivalence can mirror the kind of soul searching many adolescents feel; and the novel can elicit discussion on ambivalence. In any case, nowhere in the novel is religious propaganda advanced, and questioning—even the But in the Fall I'm Leaving questioning of one's own religion—is part of being human and growing up.

While answers are not always there, the questioning itself promotes growth.

More difficult to handle, given the period in which the book was written, is Alma's position in the novel. She hearkens back to the Mammy kind of figure portrayed in such novels as *Gone with the Wind* (Margaret Mitchell, 1936), or *Member of the Wedding* (Carson McCullers, 1946), or even the more modern *Summer of My German Soldier* (Bette Greene, 1973). While she is seen as a positive force in Brianna's family—she mothers Brianna and her father, offering food for the soul and body—she is the loyal servant. Her economic status reinforces stereotypical and negative notions of the black female's position in society. Alma's granddaughter Yvonne, who appears once in the novel, does nothing to help matters. In fact, she worsens the stereotypical typecasting. The granddaughter is not a servant to a white family: She is, however, a graduate of some "fancy secretarial school." She is looking for a job.

This kind of typecasting on the part of Rinaldi extends to women in general. Women are, by and large, more flawed than men in this book. They have not the moral power of Brianna's brother or father. They cannot "save" the world as these two men do. They also appear somewhat petty. There is Amanda, the ex-model, who is nice enough but hardly a person worth emulating. Her desire to remake Brianna into the fashion plate she should be given her position in Waltham might well irritate the reader as much as it irritates Brianna. Amanda does have the moral fiber to find a new line of work, but she needs help from Brianna's father.

In this novel, women depend upon men for guidance and support. Even Brianna, who rebels against her brother and her father, is seen as a "little" rebel: Her search for self and her struggle to define self in the world lose their force because she somehow needs



to see herself reflected in the eyes of her male elders and her "betters." Jim and Kevin McQuade also tend to be patronizingly indulgent when it comes to Brianna. Brie's position as the "baby" in the family makes matters no better. Her descent into the black hole is a serious matter, as is her need to find herself; yet the reader cannot always take her as seriously as she needs to be taken.

Yet, while Brianna returns to her father, and the reader is led to believe that this is right and good, nowhere are the father's failings really dealt with. Readers might examine this, as they might examine the kind of dynamics that make Brianna dependent upon the men in her life. Family dynamics, and what happens to women and men in the family or in the same society are real issues that can be approached through this novel.

Literary Qualities

Rinaldi once said, "My books have been praised for the strength of my characters and my dialogue." These two issues plus a strong plot line mark the literary qualities inherent in *But in the Fall I'm Leaving*. When Brianna talks to her dad or her brother, Rinaldi captures tone and feeling. With her dad Brianna is often confused, angry, and frustrated. Dialogue reveals Brianna's desire not to hurt her father as well as her need to find self. Rinaldi's use of half sentences and short powerful statements, particularly in the angry scenes between Brianna and her brother, Kevin, captures the emotionality both characters feel because they love one another, and yet they are deadlocked when it comes to their mother.

But in the Fall I'm Leaving is written from a limited first-person point of view, in which the reader sees the story through Brianna's eyes as she recounts the events that led up to her decision to stay with her father. Not only does Rinaldi employ strong dialogue, but she captures the inner working of Brianna's mind through narration.

Strong characterization in this novel is also established by Rinaldi's layering technique. First, characters are presented in a particular light. Then more is shown about them, revealing weaknesses. Characters are tested. Strengths appear. People, in this novel, particularly Brianna, must keep re-evaluating their relationship to one another. Brianna, and the reader, learn that people change—often for the better. One must be open to change. One must also understand weaknesses.

Aside from showing people as complex, Rinaldi uses satire to reveal the complexity of social issues. A humorous sense of irony informs the novel.

Brianna, who has learned social consciousness from her father, continually examines how people choose to live—how they wish appear to others, and how they really are. Furthermore, there is suspense. Brianna knows a big secret is being kept from her. Through the course of the novel, she and the reader discover just what that secret is.

Thus, some of the literary qualities which Rinaldi incorporates into her work include: (1) creating strong characters who grow from the experience of interacting and learning from one another, (2) employing excellent dialogue which reveals the tension characters feel and the emotional relationships they have with one another, and (3) developing a tight plot that plays itself out through the unraveling of a mystery. All these capture a reader's attention as does Brianna's need to find and accept self.



Themes and Characters

In her author's note to *Wolf by the Ears*, Rinaldi says: "The theme of alienation has always intrigued me . . . My own mother had died when I was born.

I never knew her family or even saw a picture of her until I was married. So there was always a part of me I could not acknowledge, a part of me I yearned to understand." Even though Rinaldi makes this remark in reference to her understanding of the alienation that Harriet Hemings, possibly Jefferson's slave daughter, might have felt, there is relevance here to *But in the Fall I'm Leaving*. Brieanna's mother had left her when she was two. After having recently visited her out in California, Brieanna plans on living with her again. But the girl is unsure whether her mother loves her.

Brieanna's sense of alienation, her feelings about being somehow unwanted (by her mother) or in the way (of her father) are important issues in this book. While Brie looks for placement inside of family and tries to understand the changing family dynamics which have arisen because of divorce, she also is faced with understanding her place in the world. She must search through her own values to decide what is the right way of living. Her feelings about social responsibility, one's relationship to Divinity, and what makes for a solid family are major themes in *But in the Fall I'm Leaving*.

Brieanna is aided in her search by Kevin, her best friend, and her brother.

Kevin is the epitome of moral responsibility: the way one should act in life according to religious precepts. He is the good priest who firmly believes in material abstinence and social responsibility. One is placed on the Earth to give to others. In his living room with "broken plaster on one wall" and "scarred wooden floor" are posters of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

To some degree Kevin appears the product of the 1960's who, as he himself claims, has negated his grandmother's plush living as false. However, as Brieanna realizes, he is also human. When it comes to meeting Brie's needs, there are times when he fails; and, while priests should offer forgiveness to everyone who seeks to be forgiven, Kevin has the most difficulty forgiving his mother. Kevin listens to Brieanna. He also helps pull her out of her blackest despair; and, while he has flaws, he is able to bring about the final reconciliation between Brieanna and her father.

Brieanna's father, Jim McQuade, is a very moral man who more than once stands up to some of the seemingly righteous member of Waltham. He is committed to truth and dedicated to his job as owner of a daily newspaper.

A gentle but strong-willed man, McQuade also does not know how to handle his daughter who, on occasion, must suffer for the truths her father exposes. While McQuade is not always there for his daughter and the divorce has had a terrible effect on him, we come to realize (as Brieanna does) that Mr. McQuade loves his daughter deeply—so much so that he has kept Brie's grandmother's identity hidden *But in the Fall*



I'm Leaving from the girl. He has not wanted to lose his youngest child either to his exwife or to his ex-mother-in-law.

Amanda, McQuade's girlfriend and lover, is a model who, because of age, is attempting to build another career.

While at times she seems very unsympathetic, particularly since the reader sees her from Brianna's point of view, she has redeeming qualities. By the end of the novel, the reader sees how much Amanda really is trying to help Brie: She wants to be her friend.

Miss Emily remains somewhat of a mystery. She is a wealthy snob who helped lay waste to her town. She also redeems herself by bringing it back to life. She tends to dote on what Kevin and Brianna see as trivialities, for instance, her doll collection; but the terms of her will show just how much she does want to do good. There are ways one goes about being good: One does not need to work with unwed mothers in Newark, she seems to say.

One can be middle class and still be of real help to others. By the end of the novel, the reader is inclined to believe that Miss Emily does offer a potential answer to living: not necessarily the right one for everyone, but not a living to be scoffed at.

Aside from these major characters, who are fairly well-rounded, there are an assortment of flat minor characters: Meg Carmichael, the bane of Brianna's existence and a nasty girl; Mr. Carmichael, the city Councilman who cheats on his wife; Alma, guardian of the McQuade household who feeds Brianna while she is fighting her psychological demons; and Gina, the good friend.



Topics for Discussion

1. Brianna and her brother Kevin have both been affected by their mother's departure. How have they responded to the divorce? Why are their responses different?

2. Throughout the novel Brianna wonders whether her father is the same newspaperman he was before the divorce. Does he have the same moral character? Is he after truth? In the end, Mr. McQuade seems to affirm this when he makes the decision to reveal names. Given that a man commits suicide because of the revelation, do you think Mr. McQuade made the right, moral decision or was Miss Emily in the right?

3. When Brianna tells Kevin that she spray painted Miss Emily's house to "save" her "soul" what does she mean?

How is this related to the black hole?

And, in the end, does it appear that Brianna has found some kind of salvation?

4. Brianna always thinks that in the fall she will leave for her mother's. In the end what does she decide? Do you think her decision is right?

5. Many of the characters in this novel seem to be complex: They are sympathetic, and yet they also have flaws. Who are the sympathetic characters in this novel? Where do they seem to fail (at least for Brianna)? Is Brianna herself totally sympathetic?

6. Alma, Nastasha, Meg Carmichael, and her father are fairly flat, one-dimensional characters. Why are they in the novel? You might explore how they advance plot and how Brianna's changing feelings about them point to change in the main character.

7. How is tension achieved in the novel? Explore places where you begin to be aware of a mystery. Can you find clues to the unraveling of the mystery?

How does the revelation of the secret make sense to you, given what occurs before it is revealed?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Miss Emily and Kevin represent two ways of dealing with materialism.

Explain their positions. What does Brianna feel about their ways of dealing with money? Does the novel lead you to choose one way of life over another? Can both be compatible with each other?

2. Do you think there are implied assumptions made about men and women in this novel? Examine how Brianna feels about the men and women in her life. Why does she feel the way she does? How do the positions men and women hold and their economic status influence the way Brianna perceives them?

3. Several pre-adolescent and adolescent novels dealing with a character's search for identity also discuss religion. Some of these novels are Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate Wars*; Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terebitha* and her *Jacob Have I Loved*; and Judy Blume's *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret*?

Compare one of these novels to *But in the Fall I'm Leaving*.

4. *Promises Are for Keeping*, a novel Rinaldi wrote three years prior to *But in the Fall I'm Leaving*, also deals with a girl's separation from family: In *Promises Are for Keeping* Nicki lost both her mother and father. Compare the two books. Things that might be considered are: 1) male characters and their relationships to the main female character, 2) social issues handled in both texts (i.e. pregnancy, vandalism) or in only one text (i.e. drugs), 3) adolescent rebellion against adult authority, and 4) moral values suggested by the writer through her characters.

5. What moral values do you perceive in *But in the Fall I'm Leaving*? Explain how you come to your perceptions by discussing scenes and narration.

6. By the end of *But in the Fall I'm Leaving* do you like Mr. McQuade?

Have your feelings about Brie's changed? Look at particular scenes or description which influenced the way you felt and chart the progress of your sentiment through to the end of the novel.

For Further Reference

May, Hal, ed. Contemporary Authors.

Vol 3. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984: 391-392. A summary of Rinaldi's life and writings.

Related Titles

Rinaldi wrote only one sequel novel.

However, her novels are related in that they deal with female adolescent characters who search for a place in family and in society. In the maturing process, the female protagonists rebel against adult (primarily male) authority. One of the most interesting of these novels, *Time Enough for Drums*, is about Jemima Emerson, the strong-willed fifteen-year-old who, after her father's death, manages his store; and, despite the American Revolution, keeps the family house afloat. What Jemima is allowed to do as a female, and what she does do are interesting to consider in comparison to what is expected of Brianna.

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