

# **The Carnival in My Mind Short Guide**

## **The Carnival in My Mind by Barbara Wersba**

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## Overview

Harvey Beaumont is fourteen, short, and lonely. He spends his days at a New York City prep school being tortured by the other boys, and he spends his evenings dreaming of residing in the midst of a carnival because his mother favors her prized Irish Setters far more than Harvey. All this changes, however, when Harvey meets Chandler Brown, a struggling, would-be actress who befriends Harvey one afternoon on a city bus. Life alters drastically for Harvey when he decides to run away from his upper east side apartment to live with the twenty-year-old Chandler in the bohemia of the East Village.

The Carnival in My Mind was selected for both the American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults and the Cooperative Children's Book Center Choices in 1982.



## About the Author

In 1932, on August 19, Barbara Wersba was born in Chicago, Illinois. Her paternal grandfather was a Russian Jew who immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century, winding up in Harlem, when Harlem was a white middle-class neighborhood. While the family grew prosperous, they still found themselves the subjects of anti-Semitic attitudes. Wersba's father married a woman from Florida outside the Jewish faith, and the two had a long but vitriolic marriage. The prejudices against the Jewish religion, and Wersba's parent's fights, have had a large influence on the empathy she feels toward her characters.

As a child, Wersba often played by herself. She dressed somberly, and spent her days daydreaming, writing poetry, and making up plays for her dolls to perform. She dreamed of becoming a poet, or a dancer, or an actress—anything to take her away from the loneliness she felt as a youth. She idolized the matinee stars of the forties, such as Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo, and at age eight or nine, Barbara decided to become an actress. At age eleven, she volunteered at a local theater in exchange for being allowed to watch rehearsals, and she soon thereafter received roles in various plays.

After her parents divorced, Wersba and her mother moved to New York City, to the upper east side. While she had to work a job, and her mother had little money, her father did pay for Wersba to attend prep schools in the city. Wersba was a poor student, except when it came to writing, and while she was still intent on becoming an actress, she continued writing. When she was sixteen, she studied acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse and studied dance with Martha Graham.

Wersba attended Bard College after graduating from prep school, where she studied drama. After college, she worked in several theaters until she fell ill with hepatitis.

During her three-month illness, she realized that she did not want to return to the theater, and she dedicated herself to writing full-time. During her convalescence she wrote a story, *The Boy Who Loved the Sea*, which was published, and she never looked back.

Wersba works out of the attic/studio in her home in North Haven, New York. She perches before a wooden craftsman's table that she purchased thirty-five years ago. In her attic, she keeps a library, which includes copies of the more than the twentyfive books she has written, many of which have been translated into different languages.

In this technological age, Wersba continues to type her manuscripts on an IBM electric typewriter. She begins each day at five o'clock in the morning and writes for six hours. She is always writing, but does not publish everything she writes. However, nothing is thrown away: she has a stack in a corner of her studio which she labels "In Progress."

Wersba describes herself as a slow writer, and an avid editor. She is said to rewrite each sentence sundry times, in an effort to make the stories flow through cadenced

language. She compares writing her sentences to building a brick wall, explaining that "if some of the bricks are weak, I can't build the wall."

## Setting

The novel is set decidedly in New York City. Wersba depicts the boroughs of the city, and the various sections of Manhattan, with clarity and detail, so that the reader can feel that he or she is walking with Harvey through the streets or in the park.

The seasons change during the story—winter is melting into spring, and the budding leaves seem to mirror the blooming that is happening in Harvey's own life.

It is important that the story be placed in the city, for the lifestyle that Chandler leads would likely be obsolete in any other town—only in New York do success and failure ride so closely together, and make such a big difference in the way one lives one's daily life. Also, the significance of city life is pronounced with regard to Harvey's mother's activities—the fact that she keeps five to ten Irish Setters at any given time would not hold such great significance if the dogs were not tied up in a high-rise apartment.

The only other setting involves Harvey's father, who is retired after a very successful banking career, and who lives a remote life out in a lovely, quiet Connecticut town.

Although he is a train ride away from the city, Harvey's father is miles and miles away from Harvey, both emotionally and physically. He never comes into the city, and Harvey sees him only once every couple of months. The inaccessibility of his father further motivates Harvey's desire to find older people on whom he can depend.



## Social Sensitivity

In creating a relationship between a young, out-of-work actress who dabbles in prostitution, and an impressionable fourteen-year-old boy, Wersba introduces a great number of social issues. The novel deals forthrightly with the deepest teen issues: feeling unwanted by parents, being the brunt of peer cruelty, running away, loneliness, love, and suicide. Chandler is underage and drinking, and she encourages young Harvey to do the same. She borrows money from him, conceals the fact that she is selling her body to men, and in fact never seems to tell the truth about anything she is doing. She can talk truthfully about her feelings, but never about what is actually happening in her life. In this way, she lives in somewhat of a fantasy land, and in this way she relates best to Harvey, who also spends most of his time hiding from life by dreaming of a more caring mother and about joining the carnival. Escapism is a common way teens and young adults (not to mention adults, as well) deal with their problems.

Suicide is also discussed in *The Carnival in My Mind*. Harvey's new friend, Chandler, asks Harvey if he has ever contemplated ending his own life. Ironically, Harvey had very recently considered how he would pen a suicide note for his mother to find, but decided he could not go through with it. The idea of hopelessness recurs throughout the novel; dreams and the notion of following one's dreams becomes a way of coping with such loss of hope.

## Literary Qualities

Wersba uses the first person narrative to allow Harvey to tell the tale entirely from his biased perspective. The reader cannot know how much of the way things are being described is true; all the reader can do is accept that this is one true version of the story, and that it is valid because Harvey sees his life in this manner.

Wersba employs sophisticated language throughout *The Carnival in My Mind*. It is clear that she loves language, and she is adept at using more difficult words within contexts to help explain the words' meanings. Although some teens might find the language rather intimidating, the author is commendable for her efforts to increase her readers' vocabulary. For example, Chandler is explaining the messy state of her apartment: Chandler sank down onto one of the large pillows that were on the floor. "People say that I'm pathologically disorganized, but I don't see it that way, I really don't. I like life around me, and color, and—oh, I don't know."

Clearly, these are words spoken by someone in a good bit of distress, someone unable to face what is really going wrong in her life—someone making excuses for her life, rather than seeking to mend it. In this way, Wersba uses a character's choice of thoughts to depict his or her inner state of mind (a state of which he or she may not even be aware). Another example is when Harvey is looking across the table at Chandler: You are so extraordinary, I wanted to say to Chan. I love your mouth, and your large hands, and the way your eyes are such a very clear blue. I love those crazy shawls you wear, and the fact that you keep thinking life will get better when I have always felt that it can only get worse.

I love you for sending the baby all those books. Chan. Chandler. In a hundred years we will be the same age.





## Themes and Characters

Harvey Beaumont stems from an unusual marriage—his father and mother are still married, but his father lives out in the country, while his mother raises and cares for a horde of Irish Setters in the middle of New York City. It is the first of many examples of irony which Wersba employs. Harvey is a classic latch-key kid, his condition being made even more pronounced by the fact that his mother ignores him even when he is at home. He is a somber teenager, unable to see beyond his miserable situation, except in his daydreams, until he meets a twenty-year-old aspiring actress. Her aplomb and sass are a balm to Harvey's wounded, neglected emotions, and he begins to know and experience joy.

Harvey is a young adult who is desperately trying to find his place in the world, by finding adults to whom he can relate, and with whom he can carry on meaningful relationships. Most of his acquaintances either treat him with contempt—his classmates, teachers, friends of his mother—or generally ignore him. He does have a positive relationship with his butler, Holmes, but such a relationship can only go so far, and Harvey is well aware of that. Then Harvey meets the beautiful Chandler Brown, who walks around with an air of flamboyancy and the distraught manner of an outcast. These two misfits bond over a mutual desire to be understood and by the basic human need to be heard.

Chandler is a story in and of herself. She is ripe for adulthood, but utterly lacking in the skills necessary to live successfully in the world. She was stripped of her family and wealth after she had an illegitimate child; her parents took legal custody of the child and disowned Chandler. Thus, she is a young woman totally alone in the world.

She is striving to make it in the theater world in New York City, but she lacks a foundation, a sense of herself, and thus the dark edges of her life have begun curling up around her. The most striking thing about Chandler is the way that, despite her web of deceit that clouds all of her relationships, she is deeply, earnestly fond of Harvey. And this is what Harvey most needs.

He does not understand all her secrecy, as no one probably could, but he accepts her as she presents herself to him, mysteries and all, happy to have someone to listen to him and to treat him as an equal. What Chandler gives to Harvey is a sense of importance about himself, and a perspective of the world that sees beyond the microcosm of his mother and their apartment, of his distant father, and of school. Although her lies crumble the foundations of her relationship with Harvey, what she has given to him—a sense of himself in the world, and an opportunity to see himself as a gifted, lovable young man—will remain with him for the rest of his life.

Whether the truth is always necessary, or even recommended, or whether lying is always harmful, is a thematic question that Wersba deals with throughout the novel.



Hence, deception is used a great deal in *The Carnival in My Mind*, as Harvey begins to understand and pursue his dreams. Although lying and sneaking are often regarded as character defects, both Harvey and Chandler routinely provide false information about their whereabouts, and invent elaborate stories about themselves. At first these deceptive behaviors are not condoned, but rather accepted as common human conduct. However when Harvey discovers Chandler Brown's prostitution, he questions the importance of truth and his relationships with people who deceive him.

Animals play an important role in the novel, as well. Harvey's mother is obsessed with her dogs, whom she used to breed but now rescues. The dogs have always been the focus of her energies. By the time readers meet Harvey, he is quite desperate for his mother's attention.

## Topics for Discussion

1. What are some the things that have happened in your life that have made you feel lonely? How have you alleviated this loneliness?
2. What is the significance of the carnival to Harvey's life?
3. What does it take to become a dog breeder and shower? Is it a worthwhile profession?
4. How does Harvey's life in New York City compare with your own? Does living in such a large city seem like an exciting or scary thing?
5. Harvey lives with a number of servants. Is this a common way of living?

What is or may be exceptional about his lifestyle?

6. Do you think that Harvey had good reasons for running away? What do you think brought him back home?
7. Discuss Chandler and Harvey's relationship. What do you think you can learn from having older friends?
8. Characterize Harvey. Consider how he sees his life, as compared with how others might view it.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does one become involved with a carnival? What is it like to live on the road, performing in all different places?

What are some of the sacrifices one has to make?

2. How realistic is Harvey's life in New York City? Could this story have taken place in real life?

3. What is it like to live in New York City?

What do teenagers do there that may differ from life in a smaller city?

4. How does Harvey deal with his feelings toward his mother? Is there a better way in which he might have tried to communicate with her?

5. How difficult is it to become an actor or actress in New York City? What does a person have to do to succeed in the profession?

6. How does the world of dog shows compare with other competitive "sports"?

What is a dog show like?

7. What is the Humane Society? Do you know anyone who has ever adopted a pet? What is involved with owning a pet?

## For Further Reference

Digilio, Alice. Review of *The Carnival in My Mind*. *Washington Post Book World* (August 8, 1982): 6. Positive review which comments on the author's appropriate application of humor.

Poe, Elizabeth A. *Presenting Barbara Wersba*.

Twayne Publishers, 1998. In-depth analysis of the life and writing career of Wersba, from her birth to the present.

"Wersba, Barbara." In *Something about the Author Autobiography Series, Volume 2*.

Detroit: Gale, 1986. Brief autobiographical essay, now rather outdated.



## Related Titles

The *Carnival in My Mind* has not been adapted into any other versions, but for those who enjoy the novel, Wersba has written a multitude of novels for youths that reflect the idea of the outcast youth struggling to find a place for himself or herself in the world. *The Best Place to Live Is the Ceiling*, written in 1990, deals with Archie Smith, a lonely teenager living in Queens, New York. Archie, undistinguished in school, and undesired by girls, spends his time at the Kennedy Airport, watching the jumbo jets take off for Europe. When a man sitting beside Archie has a heart attack and leaves his travel wallet behind, Archie takes the man's place, leaving New York for Switzerland and Europe and a bevy of adventures.

Wersba has written two trilogies, one about Rita Formica, an overweight teenager, and another trilogy about Heidi Rosenbloom. Rita grows up in Long Island, while Heidi is an affluent child of divorced parents, living with her mother in New York City. The Rita trilogy includes *Fat: A Love Story*, *Love Is the Crooked Thing*, and *Beautiful Losers*. The novels about Heidi include *Just Be Gorgeous*, *Wonderful Me*, and *The Farewell Kid*.

Other novelists writing in the same vein as Wersba include Susan Beth Pfeffer, Mary Pope Osborne, and Joyce Sweeney. Pfeffer's *The Ring of Truth*, published in 1993, tells the story of Sloan Fredericks, a teenager who finds herself in the midst of a political scandal after she tells some friends that a high-ranking government official made a pass at her, and the news gets into the gossip column. When Sloan's politically involved grandmother tries to cover up the story, Sloan learns of more serious coverups her grandmother has engaged in, and must learn how to deal with how that affects her life. In *Love Always, Blue*, published in 1984, Osborne writes about Blue, a teen who leaves her small town to live with her father in New York City. While there, Blue meets Nathaniel, with whom she falls in love; meanwhile, she learns of her father's deep depression and the way that it affects his life and her own. Finally, in 1992, Sweeney published *Piano Man*. It is the story of Deirdre, a fourteen-year-old girl who falls in love with a twenty-six-year-old piano player who moves into her apartment building. Deidre must find a way to make Jeff—the piano man—fall in love with her. While pining for his love, Deidre watches her cousin's relationship with her boyfriend become unsafe, and she learns to deal with the hardships of relationships through others' experiences, as well as her own.



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