

# Close Enough to Touch Short Guide

## Close Enough to Touch by Richard Peck

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## Overview

*Close Enough to Touch* presents a brief journey from loss to recovery and renewal narrated by Matt Moran, a seventeen-year-old high school junior in the Chicago suburbs, whose girlfriend, Dory Gunderson, has died suddenly and unexpectedly of an aneurysm. In Matt's present-tense narrative of events covering several weeks in the spring of his junior year, Peck reveals a young adult confronting not only the difficulties of loss and grief but also questions and problems involving individual identity, social class, and alienation.

The narrative follows Matt as he moves from withdrawal, silence, and obsession with the memory of Dory to guilt over the wearing away of her memory and eventually to an acceptance of her loss. This development is accompanied by rejection of Dory's clique of shallow upper-middle-class friends and an awareness that he has fallen in love with a senior girl, the witty, strongwilled, and individualistic Margaret Chasen.

Peck has written that in his novels "young surrogates for the readers have to take steps nearer maturity" and that these steps "are away from the peer group." Matt Moran, by grappling with the death of Dory, distances himself from his peers and discovers where his own identity can best be defined. He moves beyond identification with groups—Dory's upper-crust friends in the posh neighborhood of Glenburnie Woods—to an ability to relate to individuals—the somewhat eccentric Margaret and the comical but affectionately portrayed football hero, Joe Hoenig.

Matt's distancing himself from his suburban world allows him to recognize much of the emptiness of Dory's social sphere and consequently of Dory herself.

An astute, often witty and critical observer of life, Matt matures in his weeks of introversion and reenters his world with a sense of affirmation—affirmation for Margaret, for his working-class father, grandmother, and stepmother, and for the family cottage on a small nearby lake where many of the turning points in Matt's development occur. It is at the cottage where Matt declares his love to Dory. He goes there attempting to find release in distance running on the morning of Dory's funeral. Later he meets Margaret there in a ditch where she has been thrown by her horse. The novel ends there with Matt and Margaret sitting on the dock where he once sat with Dory. The circular and repetitive structure involved in Matt's visits to the cottage emphasizes Matt's growing awareness of death and renewal. Despite the tragic fact of death at the center of Matt's narrative, Peck's novel contains many comic moments and gives a view of life that is ultimately affirmative, conveying respect and encouragement for human resilience.

## About the Author

Richard Peck was born on April 5, 1934, and grew up in Decatur, Illinois, a town that has found its way into much of Peck's fiction. Decatur appears as the Dunthorpe of *Dreamland Lake* (1973) and *Representing Super Doll* (1974). As it may have been at the turn of the century, Decatur appears as the Bluff City of Peck's four comic supernatural adventure novels about Blossom Culp. Although dreaming of becoming a writer as he was growing up, Peck wrote no fiction until the age of thirty-seven. While in the army, however, he exercised his talents ghostwriting sermons for chaplains of various denominations.

In 1954 Peck attended the University of Exeter in England and received his B.A. degree from DePauw University in Indiana in 1955. In 1959 he earned an M.A. degree from Southern Illinois University and later, in 1960 and 1961, studied at Washington University. Initially pursuing a career in teaching, Peck taught high school in Glenbrook, a Chicago suburb that later became the setting for the satirical *Secrets of the Shopping Mall* (1981), and *Remembering the Good Times* (1985). He later taught at Hunter College High School in New York. In 1971 he left teaching for fulltime writing, publishing his first novel, *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt*, in 1972.

Since then his books for young adults have won numerous awards including the Friends of American Writers Award for *The Ghost Belonged to Me* in 1976 and the Edgar Allan Poe Award for *Are You in the House Alone?* in 1977. In 1981 *Close Enough to Touch* was named Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association and was a Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award nominee in 1982. Five of Peck's novels have been made into television movies.

Peck has also published poetry in anthologies and such magazines as the *Saturday Review* and writes about architecture for the *New York Times*. In addition to writing, Peck has served as a textbook editor, and from 1969 to 1970 was Assistant Director of the Council for Basic Education in Washington, D.C. Peck, who now lives on Candlewood Lake in Connecticut, is consistently acclaimed by both adult and young adult readers for his understanding of his audience and the young characters he portrays. Much of this understanding Peck attributes to his experience in the high school classroom, where, among other things he "learned that teaching is listening."

## Setting

Although Matt Moran's story begins at his family's lakeside cottage during the summer before Dory's tragic death, the bulk of the narrative covers the period from Dory's funeral in March to the close of the school year and is largely set in Glenburnie, a northwest suburb of Chicago in the 1970s. This is a realistically drawn world of freeways, upper-class neighborhoods enclosed behind stone gateways, high schools with large parking lots, apartment complexes with names like "Camelot Close," shopping malls, and decaying downtown store fronts. Matt's perceptions show a decided preference for the small farm town Glenburnie where his grandparents grew up, and a distinct awareness of class contrasts, chiefly those between the apartment where he lives with his working-class father and stepmother and the spacious homes, lawns, and golf greens of Glenburnie Woods.

Contrasting with all this is the cottage on Juniper Lake, a location for love, meditation, exercise, and eventually Matt's emotional renewal. The cottage, although part of the past, having been built by Matt's grandfather, is more a place where Matt realizes a fuller sense of time. It is here that he learns how time heals and carries life forward with continuity.

## Social Sensitivity

Like many examples of the realistic young adult novel, *Close Enough to Touch* involves some matters that could possibly concern some readers and their parents. The believable contemporary young adult in fiction may inevitably confront issues involving sexuality, drugs, alcohol, and often violence.

Although death is a central theme in the novel, there is nothing violent or gruesome involved. Neither does violence enter into any other part of Matt's experience. Peck has, however, created a protagonist who recognizes sexuality, drugs, and drinking as part of the world of his suburban peers, but his encounters with these things are handled with sensitivity by the author.

None of the problems involved with such realities are a chief concern of the novel, yet they are implied as part of Matt's environment.

Matt quite openly and maturely declares his unrealized sexual desire for Dory to his father, who is somewhat embarrassed by his son's frankness.

Even so, Matt declares the sexual element of his love with a sense of human understanding and rationality. Matt's attempt to release his grief for Dory's death by getting drunk is presented as his first and only serious experiment with underage drinking. Furthermore, the narrative makes a clear point about Matt not driving while drunk. Some readers might take issue with the fact that Matt's family does not discipline or lecture him about his experiment with alcohol, but Peck presents Matt's family as fully aware that Matt's attempt to lose grief in drink was a failed experiment from which he has learned a lesson. Drugs play only a peripheral part in Matt's experiences.

He only notes at one point that two of Dory's group, Todd and Jay, walk off to smoke a joint during the junior carwash at the mall. Matt, however, seems to have no interest in such activity.

Matt, himself a sensitive and increasingly mature young man, treats these issues sensibly.

## Literary Qualities

In *Close Enough to Touch*, Peck's use of first-person narration largely in the present tense gives a confessional tone and engaging immediacy to Matt's story. The technique does much to make Matt what Peck has called a "surrogate" for the reader. Such narration is a common literary characteristic of the young adult novel, deriving according to some critics, from Holden Caulfield's striking narrative style in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Peck creates a unity in Matt's story sometimes using allusion, symbolism, and most consistently, a meaningful structuring of setting. The action shifts between the often empty activity of the suburb and the healthy isolation of the cottage on Juniper Lake where loss can be adjusted to things that do not seem to change. At the lake the past becomes part of the present, not a memory that threatens to arrest Matt's development.

When Matt meets Margaret at the lake, her antique riding habit and aristocratic manner suggest that the past has come alive again. Margaret herself sums up the feeling when explaining why she rides sidesaddle: "It's linking up a part of the past with the present.

Who wants to be locked into anything—even a time." This larger sense of time is evident at the end of the novel when Matt sits on the dock with Margaret where he once sat with Dory.

The past returns, but with much difference.

In the suburbs setting is also meaningfully employed, especially in the descriptions of Glenburnie Woods where the stone entrance way reflects the insulation of the inhabitants, and the large empty spaces on vast lawns and within huge living rooms suggest the emptiness of the lives led there.

Finally there is Peck's use of the Hopkins poem as a way not only to introduce Matt to a perspective on death but also to meaningfully link characters and events. Dory's silent, childlike grief for the dying deer can in retrospect remind the reader of the child, Margaret, grieving in the poem for the dying leaves. Unlike the child in the poem, however, Dory herself dies before growing to realize that she grieves for the inevitability of her own death and the fact of death itself. Margaret Chasen, whose name comes from the poem, has, unlike Dory, matured and is, in a sense, the child of the poem grown up. The literary qualities, some more apparent than others, give a rich and rewarding texture to Matt's narrative and demonstrate that beneath the straightforward prose of Peck's novel there is structural subtlety to reward closer scrutiny.



## Themes and Characters

Close Enough to Touch presents a colorful assembly of characters, most of whom are sketched for us as succinct, comic caricatures by the narrator, Matt Moran. Matt, whose voice and perceptions dominate the novel, is the most fully realized character, followed closely by Margaret Chasen. Although not treated with the quick, reductive technique of caricature, Dory Gunderson, as well as Matt's father, stepmother, and grandmother are all drawn in more limited detail.

Matt is athletic, intelligent, and introverted, a loner by nature made more so by Dory's death. As a removed observer of his suburban world, he has a gift for seeing the comic and ironic elements of life but without becoming bitter or cynical. He exhibits a talent for the quick, witty, and sometimes trenchant generalization. He comments on Dory's upper-crust friends that "They aren't carrying money. The rich never do." And of his stepmother smoking low-tar cigarettes under the kitchen exhaust fan he observes that "We live in an age of anxious vices."

Although Matt is withdrawing due to Dory's death, he often shows an ability to be candid and open in conversing about his feelings, talking to his father about his unconsummated sexual love for Dory, and finally announcing his love for Margaret to her in front of her date at the senior prom. Despite such moments, Matt is frequently too controlled and deliberate. He seems compelled to plan ways to exercise his grief over Dory's death—by pushing himself in distance running, getting drunk alone on the Lake Michigan beach, going off to the cottage with plans to drop out of school. However, his emotional release finally comes more spontaneously after he meets Margaret Chasen and falls in love again. Matt meets Margaret as she is lying, at first unconscious, in a ditch where she has been thrown by her horse. She is strong-willed, assertive, and at first, impatient and slightly insulting with Matt. He is fascinated with her individuality. She is training to ride cross-horse because it preserves a tradition of the past. She attends garage and barn sales, reselling her finds at a flea market stall. And she knows poetry, introducing Matt to the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child," from which she receives her name and from which Matt receives a heightened understanding of the inevitability of death and grief. Margaret's intelligence and wit are a match for Matt's, and she has a vibrancy, curiosity and enthusiasm that contrast strongly with Dory's characteristics.

We see Dory Gunderson largely as a fading memory in Matt's mind, a girl he struggles unsuccessfully to keep alive in his feelings. As Matt strives to keep her memory alive, both he and the reader see less and less of character while also realizing that there was not much character there to begin with.

Unlike Margaret, Dory's identity is defined by a group, her inseparable friends in Glenburnie Woods. Insulated within her peer group, she seems to lack maturity. The most we see of Dory's character is in Matt's opening account of their return from the cottage the summer before she died. Matt and Dory run into stalled traffic on the





highway. A deer has been hit and is kneeling, close to death, beside the road. Matt euphemistically tells Dory, that the police will "take care of it."

Dory, crying, seems unable to confront the inevitable death of the deer or even to speak of it. Cut off later in death herself, she remains a memory of immaturity for Matt, who moves on toward adulthood.

The depth of the various characters depends on the degree of Matt's regard for them. His esteem for his family, especially his stepmother, increases throughout his struggle with Dory's death. His father, stepmother, and grandmother, although not drawn as fully as Margaret, are presented as understanding, concerned, and supportive. They treat Matt's single bout with alcohol with sympathy for the motives involved, and they try to talk openly with him about what he is going through. The remaining characters in the novel appear more as caricatures, the stock types of suburban high school life presented mostly in terms of exaggerated single traits. We at first see the fading football star, Joe Hoenig, mainly in terms of his comical hugeness.

Among the members of Dory's group, Linda is described by Matt in terms of her long, nervous, birdlike hands, Carol is represented by her squeal, and Todd and Jay have few characteristics to distinguish them from each other.

Bob Katz, the Contemporary Social Issues teacher, is characterized only by his popular psychology jargon. Ron Harvey, Matt's coworker at the clothing shop in the mall, is defined almost completely by fashionable men's wear, and a number of Matt's fellow students display personalities limited to the cars they drive. These minor characters make up a large part of the suburban backdrop against which Matt defines a more mature and individual identity.

Although death is the central event in Matt's narrative of self-definition, the novel's themes also include love, social class, alienation, grief, and renewal.

The conflicts which these themes involve are brought on by the fact of Dory's death, but her death alone becomes less important, as Matt learns from the Hopkins poem, than the fact of death itself. These themes all become intertwined as Matt comes to learn that one can fall in love again, that the past must nurture the present, that individuals matter more than groups, that alienation can be turned to useful contemplation, and that life renews itself after grief.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Are Matt's father, stepmother, and grandmother right to treat Matt's drunkenness as lightly as they do?
2. What is the significance of the book's title, a phrase that appears at the end of the novel when Matt observes that "the stars look close enough to touch?"
3. Peck's novel is sometimes a bit harsh in its portrayal of young adults from well-to-do families. Do you feel that Matt is being fair in the judgments he makes about these children of the wealthy?
4. Margaret Chasen is named after the young girl in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child." In what ways is Margaret like or not like the child in the poem? In what ways is Dory Gunderson like or not like the girl in the poem?
5. Matt sees many of his schoolmates as stereotypes or caricatures. Is Joe Hoenig an exception or not? Is there more to Joe's character than that of the typical "jock?"
6. Dory's friend, Linda Whitman, is attracted to Matt, declaring she likes him "better than . . . anybody." But Matt tells her "It would never work."

(Chapter 13). Why does he reject her?

Is he right in doing this?

7. Margaret says she rides crosshorse because "It's linking up a part of the past with the present. Who wants to be locked into anything—even a time." Matt then notes to himself that he "hadn't given it much thought."

(Chapter 9). Is there something in Margaret's statement that he should think about? Does Margaret's observation contain anything that Matt needs to know about himself?

8. How do Margaret's activities—horseback riding, flea markets—reveal her personality and her attitudes about the past? What can Matt learn from these aspects of her character?

9. Is Matt to be admired for how he eventually gets over Dory's death?

Does the fact that it only seems to take a little over two months for Matt to fall in love again show that he is callous and uncaring?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The author, Richard Peck, has stated that he creates his protagonists to be "young surrogates for the readers."

How successful is Matt Moran as such a surrogate? Is he believable and easily identified with? What techniques of writing does Peck employ to make Matt realistic and sympathetic?

2. Many of the characters in *Close Enough to Touch* appear as caricatures, often as comical figures with one or only a few exaggerated traits. Which characters qualify as caricatures, and what sort of traits do Matt's descriptions focus on to achieve this comic quality?

3. Many of Matt's comments on his world reveal him as a critic—a critic of education, of his fellow students, of modern suburbs, of upper-middle-class behavior. What specific things does Matt isolate for critical commentary?

What is it that he finds wrong with his world?

4. Compare Peck's novel to some other novel that deals with the problem of adjusting to the death of a loved one. Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terebithia* (1977) and James Agee's *A Death in the Family* (1957) could be possibilities.

5. Discuss the importance of the cottage at Juniper Lake in Matt's development. What are his feelings about it?

How do the events that take place there help Matt's development and give structured unity to his narrative?

6. Discuss the way Matt's drinking spree is presented in Chapter 6. How do you feel about the comic tone with which this incident is narrated? Is Peck right to deal with Matt's encounter with alcohol in this humorous way?

7. In Chapter 8 when Matt first meets Margaret, why might it be meaningful to the structure of Matt's development that Matt first thinks Margaret may be a ghost and then thinks "she's as dead as . . . Dory?" Is Peck using any symbolism here? Can you find other places in the novel where he might be using symbolism?

## For Further Reference

Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth. *Coping with Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1981. This and earlier books by the same writer are particularly useful in outlining the stages of acceptance which may be applied to the development of Matt in *Close Enough to Touch* as well as to the development of protagonists in other young adult novels dealing with death and dying.

Peck, Richard. *Anonymously Yours*. New York: J. Messner, 1991. In this autobiographical volume, Peck especially emphasizes how he became a writer for young adults and how material from his life is utilized in his fiction.

———. "In the Country of Teenage Fiction." *American Libraries* 4 (April 1973): 204-207. Peck here writes about young adult needs in relation to young adult literature.

———. "Richard Peck." In *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo.

Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990:165-167. In this sketch Peck provides thoughts on his own education, on what made him a writer, and gives some advice for aspiring young writers.

———. "Richard Peck on Landmarks."

In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, by Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, eds. 3d ed. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1980: 226. This brief statement by Peck discusses what he sees as the major concerns in his novels and presents some of his ideas about the difficulties involved in locating landmarks in the journey of growing up in the modern age.

———. "Some Thoughts on Adolescent Literature." *News from ALAN* 3 (September-October 1975): 4-7. In this article Peck outlines what he sees as the identifiable characteristics of young adult fiction.

Root, Sheldon L. "The New Realism—Some Personal Reflections."

*Language Arts* 54 (January 1977): 1924. This contains some useful ideas on how realism has changed young adult fiction and thoughts on how to effectively evaluate this new realism.

Ross, Catherine Sheldrick. "Young Adult Realism: Conventions, Narrators, and Readers." *Library Quarterly* 55 (April 1985): 174-191. Ross provides observations on narrative style particularly applicable to Peck's use of first-person narration.

## Related Titles

Remembering the Good Times (1985) and a satiric novel, *Secrets of the Shopping Mall* (1979), like *Close Enough to Touch* grew out of Peck's experience teaching high school in the Chicago suburbs. Each of these novels contains comic, often trenchant observations on suburban life in Glenbrook, a place thinly disguised as Glenburnie in *Close Enough to Touch*. A more gothic interest in the subject of death appears in the four supernatural comic novels featuring Blossom Culp: *The Ghost Belonged to Me* (1975); *Ghosts I Have Been* (1977); *The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp* (1983); and *Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death* (1986). In this series of novels, set in a turn of the century version of Peck's birthplace, Decatur, Illinois, the extrasensory gifts of young Blossom Culp bring her and her friend Alex Armsworth into contact with death in the past as well as death in the future.

*Dreamland Lake* (1973) also involves an encounter with death as two boys discover a male corpse and unravel the mystery that surrounds it. The problems of social class differences that figure into Matt's development in *Close Enough to Touch* are also explored in *Remembering the Good Times* (1985) when a wealthy newcomer befriends a boy and girl who have been inseparable companions since childhood.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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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

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