

Cloudy-Bright Short Guide

Cloudy-Bright by John Rowe Townsend

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Overview

Cloudy-Bright realistically deals with the beginning of a romance. Sam and Jenny are multidimensional people who, with seemingly little in common, stumblingly explore each other's characters. Their only initial common ground is Jenny's expensive camera, which she does not know how to use.

Sam needs a camera and can show Jenny how to use hers. The book challenges readers to explore Sam and Jenny's motivations and actions.

Townsend renders a straightforward portrayal of the rocky start of a relationship. The first kiss is not overdramatized; it is a peck on the cheek.

The characters react with familiar feelings of confusion and embarrassment mingled with pleasure. The low points of Sam and Jenny's meetings, such as the morning at Stratford-upon-Avon, lead them to solve their problems by facing and overcoming their pride and insensitivity to each other's needs. In this way, they become more tolerant of, and learn more about, each other. They struggle for a workable relationship based on an honest understanding of their situation and shared values.

The use of shifting points of view in the novel—chapters are alternately from Sam's and then from Jenny's point of view—leaves the responsibility of interpretation to the reader, who must decide what really happened based on two descriptions of each incident. Jenny's and Sam's points of view differ enough that the repetition of events inspires the reader to think more about what happened and to synthesize this information.

These shifting points of view also address aspects of self-image. Sam's opinion of himself is shaped by how he would like to be; hearing Jenny's thoughts helps the reader to see that Sam often misinterprets himself. Jenny is more honest about herself than Sam is, but she frequently misinterprets events because she does not know Sam's side of the story.

The differences in Sam's and Jenny's backgrounds create tensions that force them to be less judgmental and to look for alternate motivations for the other's actions. The book encourages readers to consider problems that may arise when people of different social classes begin to date each other.

About the Author

Born in Leeds, England, on May 10, 1922, John Rowe Townsend grew up a poor child in a large industrial city.

His playground was the city street, and his amusements were adventure books.

His father suffered from Parkinson's disease and could not work, so the family's income was limited. Thus it was fortunate that Townsend won a scholarship to Leeds Grammar School, although his presence there caused him many anxieties. Most of the other students had plenty of money, and field trips and uniforms were expensive.

Townsend avoided forming close friendships so he would not be expected to pay his way to events with other boys; he also skipped school trips because of the expense.

In Townsend's family, a good education was respected but not necessarily desired, and he left school at age sixteen to go to work. During World War II, he served in the Royal Air Force, although not as a pilot. While stationed for many months in Florence, Italy, a city full of artistic treasures and steeped in history, Townsend learned to appreciate art.

After the war he took a trip to Cambridge, England, and stopped in at the university to express an interest in becoming a student. Perhaps because he was a veteran, he was admitted, even though many other applicants had attended better preparatory schools and had applied to the university properly.

Townsend studied English literature and became interested in journalism. He edited the university newspaper and later got a job on the Manchester Guardian.

Townsend had always wanted to be a writer; in fact, he wrote a novel when he was eight years old. But it was not until he became the children's book editor for the Guardian, thirty years later, that he thought of writing a novel for young adults. His childhood experiences with poverty and his work on an article about the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which showed him how desperately poor and neglected some children could be, provided him with ideas for *Trouble in the Jungle*. He continued working as a journalist for many years, writing novels on the side until he could make enough money from his fiction to support his family.

Townsend married shortly after World War II, and he and his wife, Vera, had three children, one of whom now lives in Leeds. Vera died in 1973. Townsend now lives in Cambridge in a house he owns jointly with Jill Paton Walsh, another author of young adult novels. They both spend part of each year as visiting lecturers at the Center for Children's Literature at Simmons College, Boston.

In addition to writing novels, Townsend writes books and articles about children's literature.

His books have won several awards. In 1963 he was the runner-up for the Carnegie Medal for *Hell's Edge*, and *The Intruder* won the International P.E.N.

Silver Pen Award and the Boston GlobeHorn Book Award. He has been named to the Horn Book Honor List, and many of his novels have been chosen as American Library Association Notable Books.

Setting

Cloudy-Bright takes place in presentday England. Jenny lives with her parents in London; Sam lives with his aunt and uncle in Barhampton, where he attends college, Barhampton Polytechnic. Sam and Jenny arrange to meet in historically significant and picturesque towns such as Brighton, Stratford-upon-Avon, and York. Brighton has a pebbled seashore and the Royal Pavilion, an architectural marvel combining Eastern, onion-shaped domes and Western structures. Stratford is the home of William Shakespeare, but Jenny finds the quaint thatched roofs and half-timbered houses too touristy.

York, in the north of England, and wellknown to Sam, has a famous cathedral.

This ancient city dates back to the time when Britain was a Roman outpost.

In addition to these cities, the novel portrays Jenny at school and at her parents' house. It is at her grandparents' house, however, that she reveals the most about her character. A cheery, homey place with a fireplace, crossword puzzles, and caring and wise elderly people, the house offers comfort to Jenny. Sam's school, the Poly, serves as the setting where he reveals the stabler aspects of his character. His aunt and uncle's house, where he lives while he is at school, contrasts sharply with Jenny's grandparents' comfortable house.

Social Sensitivity

Cloudy-Bright presents a female protagonist who is a member of the uppermiddle class and a male protagonist who is a struggling student from the working class. This provides many opportunities for misunderstandings and for the presentation of new, less sexist solutions to problems focused on money and pride.

At one point, Sam takes Jenny out for lunch and orders the least expensive item on the menu because he cannot afford to pay for two meals costing as much as the one Jenny orders. When Jenny, suddenly understanding the situation, offers to pay for her own meal, Sam is unable to accept that solution.

They compromise by sharing all the food on the table.

One point that should be made clear to students is the difference between hitchhiking in England and hitchhiking in the United States. Although hitchhiking is becoming more dangerous in England, it is still an accepted practice.

Literary Qualities

Cloudy-Bright is told from two different, generally alternating viewpoints, Jenny's and Sam's. Both characters speak in the first person, clarifying their own thoughts about events. The story doubles back on itself when a new chapter begins because the same events are told from a different perspective. This leads readers to make up their own minds about what has happened. Individuals interpret experiences differently, based on what they know and hold important. Thus, Townsend provides for three separate interpretations: Jenny's, Sam's, and the reader's.

The alternating chapters present Jenny's and Sam's thoughts, providing a better understanding of the characters through their distinctive voices. Jenny views the world from a straightforward, sometimes cynical perspective, but she also has a lively imagination. Images such as peculiar clouds and sad little old men appeal to her. Her mind is also analytical and her voice reflects this combination: "I gathered that there was a Horsfall Theory of Taking Out a Girl," she says to herself in response to Sam's insistence on paying for their lunch. She tries to figure out Sam and ends up labeling his idiosyncrasies.

Sam's voice reveals the discrepancy between his self-image and others' perceptions of him. He prides himself on being a practical Yorkshireman, and he is fond of platitudes, but these frequently contrast with his actions. He first appears in the book saying, "It's not like me to lose things. Where I come from, you're careful with your possessions.

You have to be. The first thing you learn is that everything costs money and money doesn't grow on trees." Yet the story hinges on Sam losing things. Like everyone, Sam is inconsistent in what he does and says and thinks. He holds definite views about what makes a good photograph or how to date a girl, but frequently he finds himself accepting and even liking the different approaches Jenny suggests.



Themes and Characters

Jenny Midhurst, an upper-middleclass high school student, begins the narrative. She consistently tries to be very honest with herself. Although straightforward and dedicated to figuring out the dynamics of any situation without being self-obsessed, she can still fool herself, as she demonstrates when, facing rejection by Sam, she denies that he ever held her affections at all.

Sam Horsfall is twenty years old. The most interesting part of his character involves the discrepancy between his thoughts and his actions. He thinks often of his Yorkshire practicality and groundedness, yet his penchant for losing things contradicts his self-image.

He is a member of the working class, moving up the socio-economic ladder unsupported by his family.

Jenny's parents and her grandparents and Sam's aunt and uncle help to explain the main characters. Jenny's family is usually supportive of her, trusting her honesty and giving her room to make judgment calls. Sam's parents never appear, but he claims that they have little understanding of his goals. When Jenny visits Sam's house, the reader has the opportunity to see his aunt and uncle through more appreciative eyes.

Jenny's friend Susan provides a contrast with Jenny. Susan is materialistic, self-conscious, and obsessed with boys, while Jenny is more interested in enjoying nature and art. Susan is attracted to people based on their physical appearances; Jenny is more interested in a person's personality and depth of character.

In the same way, Sam's girlfriend Elaine contrasts revealingly with him.

His relationship with Elaine gives him the opportunity to become more aware of his values and to appreciate Jenny better. Elaine is beautiful, and Sam enjoys the attention he receives when he is with her; but she is ruthless, and Sam suffers because of it.

One of the book's most important themes concerns people's honesty with themselves. Jenny struggles to interpret every situation as honestly as she can, and this is sometimes extremely painful for her. At one point, circumstances force her to admit that Sam spends time with her only because he wants to use her father's expensive Hasselblad camera. Jenny says, "It [Sam's admiration of the camera] puts me in my place, I thought. She-who-brings-me-theHasselblad, that's what I am."

There are times when, in spite of her dedication to honesty, she is unsuccessful. Her grandparents see through her declaration that she never cared for Sam, and they challenge her on it. Jenny continues to deny her affections, but the reader sees her attempts as feeble.



Sam, on the other hand, is honest with himself only under duress. He repeatedly defines himself in completely unrealistic terms, telling himself that he has his feet well on the ground and that losing things and daydreaming are completely out of character for him. It is only upon feeling the pain of Elaine's rejection that he begins to see how much he actually cares for Jenny and begins to appreciate Jenny's depth.

Honesty with others is another strong theme in the book. Sam uses Jenny for her camera, and the narrative traces how that affects his feelings for her, her feelings for him, and Jenny's family's view of him. Once Sam and Jenny realize that he is using her, they work to change the situation, becoming more honest with each other. Likewise, Elaine uses Sam in order to get a job on the newspaper staff, providing an interesting contrast between Elaine's desire for prestige and Sam's focus on earning a living.

The contrast of upper-middle-class values and working-class values is another strong theme. Jenny learns that not everyone is like her and that people's motivations can be more complicated than they appear on the surface. When Sam does not buy her tea after their first afternoon together, after she, a perfect stranger, has allowed him to use her father's camera and has helped him all afternoon, she misinterprets his feelings for her. In fact, Sam does not have enough money to treat her.

A minor theme in the book is art. Sam has learned how to view a photograph with certain qualities in mind. He has a list of things that need to be present in a good photograph. Jenny, on the other hand, depends more on intuition. Sam's view of art as a way to material gain colors his perspective on all photography. Jenny, not having to worry about money, is free to see images for their own sake.



Topics for Discussion

1. How would the story differ if it were told from only Jenny's or only Sam's point of view?
2. Near the end of the book, three chapters in a row are told from Jenny's point of view. Why do you think Townsend does this?
3. Both Jenny and Sam are dealing with their first significant romantic experience. Who changes more as a result of their experience together? In what way does Jenny change? In what way does Sam change?
4. Sam's education helps him to look for certain qualities in each photograph that he sees. Jenny depends on her intuition. What are the advantages of each approach? Which approach do you more often use? Why?
5. There are different ways of interpreting the title of the book. How would you explain it in terms of photography? In terms of Sam and Jenny's relationship?
6. When Jenny realizes that Sam cannot afford to pay for two lunches as expensive as the one she has ordered, she feels awkward, and his pride is hurt.

What would you have done if you were Sam? Would you have admitted the problem to Jenny? If you were Jenny, what would you have done?

7. Sam's pride often interferes with his ability to communicate with Jenny. He does not tell her that he might be late because he has to hitchhike to Stratford.

He does not tell her that he cannot afford to treat her to tea after their first meeting in Brighton. Is he right in keeping these troubles to himself? Why or why not?

8. Discuss the differences between how Sam sees himself and how Jenny sees him. How does Sam see Jenny?

Does his perspective of Jenny differ significantly from how she sees herself?

How?

9. Elaine seems wholly selfish and egotistical, using the people she knows only to further her own interests. Do you think people like Elaine really exist?

What aspects of Elaine do you suppose we never see in Townsend's book?

10. When Jenny visits Sam's family and when Sam visits Jenny's family, their understanding of each other and of their relationship changes significantly.

How does meeting the family of a boyfriend or girlfriend change a relationship?

11. Personal honesty and honesty with others are two of the values that Townsend upholds. What other values does Townsend stress?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Choose one event in the book and compare the ways Jenny and Sam see it.
2. Explain the vocabulary related to photography. Determine what speed film and aperture size you would need for a cloudy day, for a bright day, and for a cloudy-bright day.
3. Find words and phrases that are examples of British English. What sorts of customs strike you as being British?

See if you can find American equivalents.

4. Compare the strengths of two of the following characters: Sam's aunt; Jenny's grandfather; Jenny's mother; Elaine; Susan.
5. What qualities would you look for if you were judging a photography contest for a fashion magazine? For a nature calendar? For a portrait of your hometown?
6. Find out more about one of the cities that Sam and Jenny visit. What would you take pictures of? What places would you visit? Why is the city an important one?



For Further Reference

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Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale Research, 1973. Contains a biographical overview punctuated by Townsend's own words about his life and work.

Egoff, Sheila, G. T. Stubbs, and L. F. Ashley, eds. *Only Connect*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969. This collection of essays about literature for children and young adults contains two essays by Townsend.

Riley, Carolyn, ed. *Children's Literature Review*. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976. Contains excerpts from reviews of books Townsend wrote before 1976.

Sarkissian, Adele, ed. *Something about the Author, Autobiography Series*. Vol.

2. Detroit: Gale Research, 1986. Along autobiographical essay by Townsend includes photos of the author at different stages in his life.

Townsend, John Rowe. *A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children*. New York: Lippincott, 1971.

This collection of essays by Townsend about other writers contains an introduction defining his views about literature.

A Sounding of Storytellers: New and Revised Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children. New York: Lippincott, 1979. Many of the same authors who are included in *A Sense of Story* are dealt with again, and some new authors are added. The introduction is the same.

Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature. New York: Lippincott, 1965. This is a historical study of the literature that has been written for children.

Townsend, John Rowe, and Jill Paton Walsh. "Writers and Critics: A Dialogue between Jill Paton Walsh and John Rowe Townsend." *Horn Book* 58 (1982): 498-504, 680-685. In this dialogue, the two writers discuss their views of writing for children and young adults.

Related Titles

In many of Townsend's books, central themes are poverty and surviving in a ghetto environment. These themes stem from his childhood in Leeds, where he was poor and spent much of his time playing in the streets. The protagonist of *Dan Alone* lives in a place much like the one where Townsend grew up. Sam, in *Cloudy-Bright*, comes from a similar background. Other books about this sort of environment and its challenges are *Trouble in the Jungle* and *Good-bye to the Jungle*; the "Jungle" is the name of a ghetto within an industrial city.

Townsend explores the conflicts that arise when wealthy people and working-class people interact in *Hell's Edge*.

Like the situation in *Cloudy-Bright*, an upper-class girl and a working-class boy learn to get along with each other.



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