

# David and Jonathan Short Guide

## David and Jonathan by Cynthia Voigt

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

# Contents

<a href="#">David and Jonathan Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>

# Overview

David and Jonathan is a dense, complex novel that deals with multiple issues: the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, war, guilt, family life, friendship, coming of age, and sexual, cultural, and racial identity. Henry Marr and Jonathan Nafiche, intelligent sixteen-year-olds, have been friends since fifth grade in spite of their different backgrounds. Henry is from a staid New England family whose maternal ancestors arrived in America on the Mayflower. His mother is a teacher, and his father is a financially unsuccessful musical composer. The family is somewhat estranged from the Chapin grandmother who is wealthy but who does not approve of Henry's father. The Marr family is reserved and stoic, and Henry turns to Jonathan and the Nafiche family for most of his nurturing.

Jonathan is Jewish, and his is an extended family formed from the political turmoil of the 1930s. His mother, then a widow with two small children, married his father, a widower with three children of his own, by proxy, she in Germany, he in Yonkers, New York. Mr. Nafiche's citizenship enabled Myra Rosen Nafiche to leave Germany before the borders were closed to Jewish citizens wishing to emigrate. Living with the Nafiche family is Mr. Nafiche's father-in-law, the father of his first wife, who is known by all as the Rabbi. The Nafiche family is warm, generous, and loving, but it is a disturbed family, one marked by the horrors of the Holocaust and its aftermath.

Henry and Jonathan's close friendship is disrupted by the arrival at the Nafiche home of David Steintodt, Mrs. Nafiche's twenty-year-old nephew.

David is a survivor of the Holocaust, the only one of Mrs. Nafiche's family to escape, and in spite of treatment for several years in a psychiatric center, he is suicidal. For this reason, the family maintains a close watch over David, and Jonathan begins spending most of his time with him, leaving Henry alone and lonely.

Henry is at first angered and hurt by being excluded from David and Jonathan's companionship, but he comes to understand how disturbed David is and accepts that Jonathan's energies are being absorbed by David's brooding dementia. He dedicates himself to what he thinks is helping Jonathan save David. Eventually Henry realizes that the larger struggle is not to save David from himself but to keep David from destroying Jonathan as David seeks to draw Jonathan into his troubled, destructive thinking.

David's eventual suicide releases both boys from the tensions his presence has created, but it leaves a permanent shadow across their friendship, a shadow not erased until years later when the two meet in Vietnam. There, in a grim military hospital, Henry, now Captain Marr, Surgeon, encounters Jonathan, badly injured and perhaps soon to die. In the ensuing days, as Henry skillfully tends Jonathan and restores him to life, the two lay to rest the specter of David and resolve questions of their own identities. Each returns to the United States secure at last in the direction his life is to take and ready to reach out to its possibilities.

## About the Author

Cynthia Voigt is a writer of impressive productivity. Since her first book in 1981, she has published one book per year, sometimes two. At present, she has written seventeen books for young adults, one for children, and one for adults. Her books are marked by a wide variety of subject matter in which she explores ideas and interests that mirror those of her readers.

Voigt was born February 25, 1942, in Boston, Massachusetts. She was the second of five children, having two sisters, and twin brothers, thirteen years her junior. Her childhood was spent in rural southern Connecticut.

She attended Dana Hall School in Wellesley, Massachusetts, a private girls' boarding school, and later Smith College, where she graduated in 1963.

After graduation she moved to New York City where she worked for an advertising agency. She married her first husband in September 1964. When she encountered difficulty finding a job, she completed the certification requirements necessary to teach school, a career change that she says was a happy choice for her. She taught high school English in Glen Burnie, Maryland, 1965-1967. In 1968 she moved to The Key School in Annapolis where she remained for many years as a teacher, part-time teacher, and department chair. Voigt divorced in 1972 and married Walter Voigt, a teacher of Latin and Greek at The Key School, in 1974.

She is the mother of two children, daughter Jessica and son Peter. She and her family have recently moved to Maine. Among her personal interests—in addition to life with her husband, son, and daughter—she includes going out to dinner, summer trips to the family's island in the Chesapeake Bay, and walking in old cemeteries.

Voigt published her first book, *Homecoming*, in 1981. In it she began the saga of the Tillermans, a family of four fatherless children who are abandoned by their mentally ill mother, a story that evolved into six additional books.

Voigt has won many awards for her writing, including the 1983 Newbery Medal for *Dicey's Song* and the 1984 Edgar Allan Poe Award for *The Callender Papers*. *A Solitary Blue* was named a 1984 Newbery Honor Book.

# Setting

The central narration of David and Jonathan is set on Cape Cod in the 1950s during the Korean War. Henry Marr and Jonathan Nafiche attend Orleans High and live within biking distance of each other. Henry's home, a sprawling clapboard cottage on Beach Road, has been inherited from a distant relative, and little has been done to make it cheerful or attractive. Jonathan describes Henry's living room as "aesthetically unfit for human life." Henry agrees with Jonathan, but his parents seem oblivious to its drabness.

Jonathan's family lives above the restaurant they run in Eastport. Their apartment is dominated by the kitchen, a large room cluttered with utensils and staples, that reverberates with the activities of the Nafiches. It is a room for talking, for making family decisions, for sharing the strudel Mrs. Nafiche bakes each Sunday afternoon.

Henry finds Jonathan's home a welcoming haven until the presence of David changes his relationship with the Nafiches.

The boys spend much of their time on the beach near their homes, playing in the bone-chilling waves that roll in from the Atlantic or walking among the low, sandy dunes. There are occasional forays into Boston or Provincetown, but it is on the beach, at school, and in and around their homes that the core of David and Jonathan is played out.

Framing the main story and serving as prologue and epilogue, are brief episodes set in a military hospital in Vietnam in 1967. Jonathan, a recently rescued POW, has serious head injuries that require Captain Marr's superior surgical skills. Henry is able to "limit the damage" to Jonathan, and Jonathan helps Henry determine that since he has a life, he should "contrive to live it."

# Social Sensitivity

In *David and Jonathan*, Voigt has written a sophisticated book that deals with weighty problems. In such a book it is inevitable that there will be potentially sensitive areas.

Topics which may be of interest to parents, teachers, and librarians: 1) The book includes a discussion of masturbation. 2) Henry has homoerotic and heteroerotic fantasies.

3) Jonathan's sister Enid and David have a sexual relationship which David discusses with Henry. 4) Vulgarities and curses are occasionally used. 5) There is frequent discussion of religion, including an instance in which the genitalia of God is mentioned.

# Literary Qualities

In *David and Jonathan*, Voigt has written a poignant tale of coming-of-age.

One of the novel's strengths is that it focuses on crucial issues and confronts them with realism. Voigt does not avoid the horrors of the Holocaust, the savagery of war, or the inevitable suicide of David. She realistically presents the darker aspects of life:

Jonathan is left partially blind; Mrs. Nafiche is alcoholic; and Jonathan's sister is barren due to back street abortions. The book also raises open-ended questions that give the reader room to develop understanding. As Jonathan and Henry grapple to answer questions about man's place in the universe, about the nature of God, about the purpose of suffering, about guilt and responsibility, the reader is led to consider them also.

Another strength of this work is the skill with which Voigt has drawn the characters. Henry and Jonathan dominate the story and are vibrant, enduring personalities who ring true, who act with autonomy, and who grow and change during the course of the action.

David, although more illusive, is nonetheless convincingly presented, and through him the Holocaust is made more graphic. Voigt contrasts the postHolocaust David, who is cruel, manipulative, and crudely gluttonous, with the picture of him at six, a charming Botticelli angel, and Henry aches with the sorrow of it.

Other literary techniques which Voigt employs to enhance the book are using symbolism and foreshadowing to heighten and intensify the tension; making frequent literary and biblical allusions to give the text intellectual depth; and incorporating historical events such as the Holocaust and the Korean and Vietnam Wars to anchor the story in time and to further the theme and plot.

# Themes and Characters

The book's central characters, Henry, Jonathan, and David, create a riveting triangle that intensifies the dramatic thrust of the story. Henry is stoic, deliberate, and introspective, traits formed from his patrician New England background and the manner in which his parents have reared him. In contrast, Jonathan is irrepressible and loquacious, and he possesses an amazing optimism in the light of the brutality his extended Jewish family has experienced in Nazi Germany.

Henry and Jonathan are unusually precocious for their sixteen years.

While the questions that engage them are sometimes typically sex and lust, they have mature discussions in which one marvels at the depth of their perceptions. They bandy literary quotations and allusions back and forth with frequency and ease, and their talk is distinguished by Talmudic parables.

While these extemporaneously invented parables are often confusing, and sometimes outright incomprehensible, they do serve to heighten the assessment of the two as characters with formidable intellect.

David is twenty years old, has survived the Holocaust, the lone member of his family to do so, but he is permanently scarred, almost without soul.

Only once, in a fleeting moment when Henry and David first meet, is there indication of an inner David reaching out to the world. To heighten the sense of his disturbed state, Voigt surrounds David with contradictions: 1) He has kept himself alive through the trauma of the Holocaust, but he is now intent on killing himself. 2) He is strikingly handsome outwardly, but inwardly he is twisted and ugly. 3) He seems to despise Henry and Jonathan, yet constantly needs their attention. 4) He inspires in Henry contrasting emotions of overwhelming pity and deep loathing. 5) Having witnessed indescribable suffering caused by cruelty, he, nevertheless, embraces cruelty and perpetuates it. 6) Although he is with the Nafiches only a short time, in those few months, he permanently changes the lives of the other characters. Sadly, the question of "Who is David?" cannot be answered. The Nazis have taken even his name, and nothing can be done to restore him to himself. He is eventually successful at suicide, and because Jonathan's sister Enid has aborted David's baby, his lineage is forever ended.

Voigt has created in David and Jonathan a book that deals with complex and challenging issues. Through straightforward presentation of the Holocaust, she raises the question of man's inhumanity to man, but juxtaposes this theme with the friendship of Henry and Jonathan that is a paean to the power of love to promote good.

Throughout the novel she interjects and entwines other themes, among them coming-of-age, war, death, suffering, guilt, and good versus evil.



Although the themes vary in intensity and importance, it is the presentation of the Holocaust that is the most powerful and compelling concern of the book. Henry and Jonathan have long known of the death camps and are aware of the toll they have taken on Jonathan's extended family, but David gives the horror of the Holocaust definition and shape and brings home its reality to them. Henry is overwhelmed by sorrow as he struggles to answer the questions the reality raises. The reader is thus brought to the inevitable questions of the Holocaust and the lessons it has for history.

# Topics for Discussion

1. David is with the Nafiche family only a few months; yet, he leaves a permanent mark on the lives of the Nafiches and on Henry. Why does he have such an enduring effect on them?
2. David has survived the Holocaust through fortitude and grit. He is the only member of his family still alive after the War. Now, he is determined to kill himself. Why does he wish to do so?
3. Jonathan changes much about his life after David's arrival in order to help give David constant supervision.

What does this reveal about Jonathan?

4. When David runs over a cat with the car and severely wounds it, Henry kills the cat with a club. Why does Henry do this when he was not the one who wounded it?
5. Jonathan is especially fond of inventing parables to enliven his discussions. Do you find these parables amusing or distracting? Do they aid in understanding Jonathan and Henry?
6. Enid aborts the baby which she and David conceived. Why do you think she did this?
7. When Jonathan leaves Vietnam, he decides he will return to Cape Cod to run the family restaurant although he has a Ph.D. in linguistics. Why did he decide to do this? Are you satisfied with this decision?
8. Both Jonathan and Henry remain in Vietnam longer than was required.

Jonathan reenlists after his first tour of duty and Henry refuses appointments to hospitals in the States. What do you think motivates them?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. David eventually succeeds at suicide. Is this an inevitable outcome of the story? What other ways might Voigt have ended this story and still achieve a satisfactory resolution of conflict?

2. Oral history is a valuable research tool for use in gathering information and increasing understanding about a particular event or era. Interview a person who participated in the Vietnam or Korean Wars or in World War II about his or her war experiences.

Alternately, you might interview a civilian who was not in the war, but one who could tell about life on the homefront during one of those wars.

3. Henry's father was a conscientious objector during World War II and was confined to a camp with other objectors. He was subsequently held in disdain by his wife's family. What is a person's obligation to his country in terms of military duty?

4. During the Vietnam War many young Americans fled to Canada to avoid being drafted for military duty.

Is the draft a just way to raise an army? Should a country's draft laws apply equally to men and women?

5. Explain the significance of the fledgling osprey which falls from its nest and which Jonathan and Henry cannot rescue.

6. Learning to read critically is an important skill. Discuss how realistic it is for David to be intelligent, gifted, and shockingly handsome after suffering severe deprivations as a child. Consider his childhood experiences and his weight at age fourteen.

7. Compare and contrast the two mothers, Mrs. Marr and Mrs. Nafiche.

8. David accuses Henry of having homosexual feelings toward Jonathan.

Jonathan also asks Henry about his sexual orientation. Does Voigt present any internal evidence to suggest Henry is homosexual?

9. One of the reasons for studying history is to learn lessons from it that will serve the future. What lessons can be learned from the Holocaust?

## For Further Reference

Irving, Elise K. "Cynthia Voigt." *Horn Book* (August 1983): 410-412. The article accompanies Voigt's Newbery acceptance speech. It is written by a friend and addresses questions about her personality and motivation as a writer.

Kauffman, Dorothy. "Profile: Cynthia Voigt." *Language Arts* (December 1985): 876-880. The author writes a profile of Voigt based on an interview. She explores Voigt's sources for her stories, the inspiration for her characters, and the reasons for the similarity of her settings.

Shadiow, Linda K. "Recommended: Cynthia Voigt." *English Journal* (April 1987): 71-72. Shadiow writes of the qualities that make Voigt's characters memorable—characters who "get to both their external and internal destinations."

Voigt, Cynthia. "About Excellence."

*Language Arts* (January 1986): 10-11.

Voigt discusses the idea of excellence and concludes there is no reliable standard by which it can be measured.

———. "Newbery Medal Acceptance."

*Horn Book* (August 1983): 401-409.

This is the speech given to the American Library Association when Voigt accepted the Newbery Medal for *Dacey's Song*. In it she speaks of the excellence consistently found in children's literature and delineates the roles of editors, publishers, and librarians in fostering this excellence.

———. "On Teaching." *Language Arts* (November 1985): 740-741. This answers the question Voigt is often asked since winning the Newbery, "Will you stop teaching now?" She gives an explanation of the reasons why she teaches.

Voigt, Jessica. "Cynthia Voigt." *Horn Book* (August 1983): 413. Voigt's daughter writes a brief, warmly personal view of her mother.

## Related Titles

While *David and Jonathan* is unique among Voigt's young adult novels in subject matter and level of sophistication, its theme of friendship and growth through interpersonal relationships is repeated in other books she has written. *Dicey's Song* relates the story of fourteen-year-old Dicey who is a loner in her high school until she develops a friendship with classmate Wilhemina (Mina) Smiths. Dicey is burdened with the responsibility of caring for two younger brothers and a sister, is harassed and preoccupied by money worries, and is hardened by the years of growing up with a missing father and a mentally ill mother. Her classmates see her as a skinny kid in outlandishly poor clothing, distant and aloof, and are content to leave her alone. However, Mina looks beneath Dicey's tough exterior to discover Dicey's wit, strength of character, loyalty, and resourcefulness. Through their friendship, Dicey becomes less of a loner and establishes a niche of her own in school.

Just as Dicey's friendship with Mina nurtures Dicey and aids her emotional development, Dicey's friendship with Jeff Greene, related in *Solitary Blue*, is an emotional ballast for him. Jeff's mother leaves home for good when he is seven years old and abandons him to his remote, unemotional, and preoccupied father. Jeff grows up striving to please his father lest his father becomes angry and leaves also. Some years later his mother reenters Jeff's life, but she betrays his love for her and leaves him wounded and broken, a "ghost in his own life." Dicey's friendship becomes an important element in Jeff's healing as he learns she is straight and solid, a person he can trust. Eventually Jeff develops a feeling of self-worth, someone to be liked, and even finds he can like himself.

One of Voigt's more unusual portrayals of the theme of friendship is seen in the relationship between Bullet Tillerman and Tamer Shipp in *The Runner*. Bullet is a stubborn, angry seventeen-year-old who is locked in conflict with a cold, domineering father. He is determined to remain his own person in spite of the stern demands of his father and the unvoiced needs of his mother. Bullet is a state champion cross-country runner, and it is in track that he meets Tamer. Tamer is an older student, already married with a child, when he enrolls in Bullet's school. The coach asks Bullet to help train Tamer in cross-country, but Bullet refuses because Tamer is black. Eventually Bullet overcomes his prejudice, and he and Tamer run together. The two never become "buddies," but a deep bond develops between them. In a later book, *Come a Stranger*, Tamer voices how much he loved Bullet, and Bullet's actions attest his love for Tamer. Each character gains insights that aid his maturation as a result of the relationship.

# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

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