Dear Mr. Henshaw Short Guide

Dear Mr. Henshaw by Beverly Cleary

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Contents

Overview

Dear Mr. Henshaw is an entertaining book that offers the distinct pleasure of reading a boy's personal letters and private diary. Within the novel's pages, Cleary effectively and sensitively handles the delicate problem of a young adult's struggle with the effects of his parents' divorce and conveys the message that dedicated work to improve one's situation will result in both maturity and satisfaction.

Leigh Botts must learn to accept that his parents will never remarry, no matter how much he might like them to, and that he cannot count on his father to be available when he needs him. The daily problems Leigh faces are familiar to many young adults: classroom assignments, a name he dislikes, an absent father, a working mother, a move to a small house, loneliness, a lunch bag thief, staying at home alone before and after school, broken promises, a lack of friends, a broken television set, and a missing pet. Some problems Leigh cannot solve, such as divorce and a father who fails to keep promises. Others, though, Leigh struggles to solve himself.

For example, he engineers a lunch box alarm to stop the thief from stealing his treats. Cleary sprinkles humor through the pages and balances unfortunate situations with pleasant ones as Leigh grows to understand himself and life.

Thus, the book is both entertaining and enlightening.

About the Author

Beverly Atlee Bunn Cleary was born on April 12, 1916, in McMinnville, Oregon. She lived on a farm in the Willamette Valley in Oregon until she was six. Her love affair with children's books began when her mother had books sent from the state library each week and acted as librarian for Yamhill, a town too small to have its own library.

At the age of six, Beverly moved with her family to Portland, Oregon, where she attended elementary and high school. Despite her initial frustration in learning to read and the "disgrace" of being placed in the "lowest" reading group, by grade three she had mastered reading. She proceeded to read nearly every children's title in the public library, but she found few examples of the type of book she wanted to read most: funny stories about ordinary boys and girls. As a result of a sixth grade writing assignment and the encouragement of the school librarian, she decided that when she grew up she would write stories of this kind.

After graduating from junior college in Ontario, California, she earned a bachelor's degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1938 and a degree in librarianship from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1939.

She was a children's librarian in Yakima, Washington, during the years 1939 and 1940. After marrying Clarence T. Cleary in 1940, she served as post librarian for the U.S. Army hospital in Oakland, California, from 1943 through 1945. She is the mother of twins, a son and a daughter, now grown.

Since her first book, Henry Huggins, was published in 1950, Cleary has produced nearly a book every year. She has enjoyed a long relationship with William Morrow and Company, the publisher of all her books. Her ever-popular characters, Henry, Beezus, and Ramona, have become favorites with elementary and middle school students.

Sensitive to her readers, Cleary wrote Fifteen, a book dealing with the emotions of first love, when junior high school girls asked her to write about children their age. Similarly, Dear Mr. Henshaw resulted when several boys requested that she write a book about a boy whose parents are divorced. Recently, Cleary has written short stories for adults, one of which, "Josie Lays Her Down to Sleep," appeared in the February 1985 issue of Woman's Day.

Cleary has accumulated a staggering list of awards and honors. These include the Distinguished Alumna Award from the University of Washington in 1975; the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award from the American Library Association in 1975 for substantial and lasting contributions to children's literature; the Children's Choice Election Award, second place, in 1978; the Regina Medal from the Catholic Library Association in 1980 for "continued distinguished contributions to children's literature"; the de Grummond Award from the University of Mississippi and a Silver Medallion from the University of Southern Mississippi, both in 1982, recognizing her lasting contributions to children's

literature; the United States nomination for the prestigious international Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1984; the Euerychild citation for children's books in 1985.

In addition, Dear Mr. Henshaw has received many awards: inclusion on School Library Journal's "Best Books of 1983" list; New York Times Notable Book of 1983; Horn Book's honor list in 1984; the Christopher Award in 1983; Notable Book citation from the American Library Association in 1984; the John Newbery Medal from the American Library Association in 1984; the Commonwealth Silver Medal from the Commonwealth Club of California in 1984; and the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Memorial Children's Book Award in 1985. deary's long list of awards comes as no surprise to the many readers who have clamored for her stories for over three decades and look forward to more in years to come.

Setting

The first third of Dear Mr. Henshaw consists of a series of letters from Leigh Botts to a children's book author. The letters include a month and date, but the year is purposely omitted so as not to date the book. Leigh writes the first letter while he is in second grade, the second in third grade, the third and fourth in fourth grade, and the fifth and sixth in fifth grade. During the second through fifth grades, Leigh lives with his mother and father in a mobile home outside of Bakersfield, California. From the seventh letter on, Leigh is a sixth grader grappling with a move to Pacific Grove on California's central coast, his parents' divorce, and an anonymous lunch bag thief. He lives in a very small house that is "sort of falling apart" and furnished with items from a thrift shop.

The house sits on a city street next to a gas station. The contemporary issues in Dear Mr. Henshaw suggest a 1980s setting, but Leigh's emotions and insights are timeless.

Social Sensitivity

Cleary treats the contemporary issues of divorce and single parenthood with sympathy and realism. She makes clear that even though Leigh longs for his parents to get back together, they never will. For a while, Leigh hates his father.

His father has left him, seemingly has forgotten him, and even has a new boy in his life. But after he calms down, Leigh admits, "I don't hate my father either. I can't hate him. Maybe things would be easier if I could." He leams to love his father for his good qualities and to accept both the imperfect man and the divorce.

Cleary portrays Leigh's mother, Bonnie Botts, as a hard-working, caring person who is not given to spoiling her only child. When the television breaks she does not get it fixed because she wants Leigh to find other activities to occupy himself. She sometimes works long hours at her catering job and also takes college courses in nursing. Although she can provide only a small, old home and few extras, she clearly wants the best for her son. She encourages his friendships, creativity, writing, and thinking.

The author handles the subjects of divorce and single parenthood honestly and positively, and though the father's weaknesses are evident, few adults would object to Cleary's realistic portrayal of modern relationships.

Literary Qualities

Dear Mr. Henshaw is deary's most serious work, and many critics consider it her best. It is clearly a departure in format, style, content, and tone from her usual lighthearted books. The exclusive use of journal entries and letters to Mr. Henshaw makes the novel unique among Cleary's works. This "epistolary" technique was first used in Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1740). The only details provided about Leigh, his life, and his family are those revealed in his own letters and diary. The result is a very personal story that seems almost like an autobiography; the reader easily relates to Leigh as he bares his thoughts and feelings through his writing.

With charming style, Cleary conveys Leigh's immaturity in his early letters.

Common misspellings ("Keep in tutch") and improper word usage ("I am a great enjoyer of your books") at once amuse the reader and make the character likable. The very first letter, for example, states simply, "My teacher read your book about the dog to our class. It was funny. We licked it." The closings are sometimes humorous as well: "Your freind," "Your friend," "Your best reader," "Your favorite reader," "Disgusted reader," "Your pooped reader," "Still disgusted," "Pooped writer," and "Fooey on you." Some of the postscripts appeal to children, especially: De Liver De Letter De Sooner De Better De Later De Letter De Madder I Getter Then I turned another page and saw Honorable Mention and under it, A Day on the Rig by Leigh M, Botts.

Gradually, as Leigh grows older and matures as a writer, the spelling and usage errors fade. When he begins writing in his diary, he starts each entry with "Dear Mr. Pretend Henshaw" since he learned to write through letters to the writer. But even this ends after he gains confidence as a writer.

Although Cleary generally employs a straightforward style devoid of hidden meanings, two examples of symbolism stand out in this book. When Leigh goes into a protected area to view monarch butterflies, he cannot see them at first.

After a while he notices what look like many "little brown sticks" covering the branches of trees and realizes that they are thousands of resting butterflies. The sun appears and the "sticks" begin to flutter about until the fog rolls in and they alight again. The passage shows how the depressed boy finds solace and comfort, even joy, in nature. Beyond that, the butterflies may represent little boys such as Leigh who appear plain and ordinary and go unnoticed, who do not even show up against the background, but who, given the appropriate conditions, flutter their wings and show their true and beautiful colors.

Another instance of symbolism is the ten-foot wax truck driver who Leigh tries to write a story about. The wax man probably stands for the truck-driving Bill Botts. Long haul truck drivers are the modern romantic equivalent of cowboys, who traditionally represent freedom, adventure, and the American dream. In the illustration by Paul O. Zelinsky, Botts wears a western hat.

Symbolically, the father's heroic status disintegrates under the heat of reality.

Leigh's realization that the story will not work because the character cannot resolve the situation if he is melted reveals Leigh's budding maturity and, perhaps, his acceptance of his father.

This acceptance becomes even more evident in his final choice of a topic, A Day on Dad's Rig.

Finally, the book would not be effective without a tight plot. Although there are many problems bothering Leigh—his parents' divorce, his lack of friends, and the lunch bag thief, to name a few— Cleary manages to tie them all together into one complete package from the beginning to the realistic and satisfying ending.

Themes and Characters

The protagonist, Leigh Marcus Botts, introduces the characters in Dear Mr. Henshaw through the letters that he writes to children's book author Boyd Henshaw and, later, through the diary that he keeps. Leigh describes himself as "just a plain boy. . .the mediumest boy in the class." While the school does not consider him to be "Gifted and Talented," he is "not stupid either."

Bright, sensitive, thoughtful, and a bit of a loner, Leigh classifies himself as "Just a boy nobody pays much attention to." The author, Henshaw, is revealed only through Leigh's responses to his letters. Henshaw, exasperated with questions from school children, gives silly answers to some of Leigh's questions and includes his own set of questions. Upon receiving Leigh's answers to his own questions, Henshaw shows a more adult concern for a troubled child, and he tries to help, even though he is busy with his work. Leigh never meets Henshaw, but toward the end of the book he meets a "Famous Author" who describes Boyd Henshaw as "a very nice young man with a wicked twinkle in his eye."

The other characters mentioned in the letters and diary include Leigh's father, Bill Botts, a truck driver who, despite his good qualities, has a bad habit of breaking promises, and who has never quite grown up; his mother, Bonnie Botts, a single parent who works for a caterer while studying to become a nurse; his dog, Bandit, who rides the highways with Leigh's father; the custodian, Mr. Fridley, a "nice, sort of baggy and comfortable" man whom Leigh likes better than his teacher; Miss Martinez, Leigh's sixth grade teacher; the school librarian, Miss Neely, who surprises Leigh by noticing him; Chuck, a man who works at the gas station next door; Barry, a friend whom Leigh meets at school; and Angela Badger, the Famous Author.

Besides Mr. Henshaw, there is another character whom Leigh never meets but mentions in his writing. While talking to his father on the telephone, Leigh hears a child's voice in the background. The child asks Bill Botts when they are going out to get pizza. The "pizza boy" represents a new boy in Leigh's father's life, causing pain and jealousy in the son.

The cast of characters is complete enough to allow a well-rounded picture of Leigh's life as developed through the interaction portrayed in his writing.

The theme of growing up runs through the entire book. Leigh's early letters to Mr. Henshaw are childish; the use of language and unintentional mistakes are at once charming and typical of young children. As Leigh becomes older, even from the fall to the spring of his sixth grade year, his command of the written language improves. So, too, does his understanding of life's situations, of emotions, and of people. Whereas at the beginning of the book Leigh describes his father as "real big" and is obviously proud of his father and his large truck, he comes to realize that, despite his good qualities, his father cannot be counted on and is not a man of his word. Still, Leigh learns to love his

father despite his weaknesses. By the end of the book, Leigh has matured and is, perhaps, already more grown up than his father.

Bill Botts proudly admits to his son, "You're smarter than your old man."

Some credit for Leigh's maturity must go to his mother and, indirectly, to Mr. Henshaw. Mr. Henshaw's books impress Leigh, and his answers to Leigh's questions about writing and his own list of questions make Leigh focus on writing techniques. His wise mother insists that her son answer the questions, and she refuses to get the television set fixed because she wants him to use his brain.

Likewise, she does not let him "hang around" the gas station or anyplace else.

His mother's encouragement and Mr. Henshaw's suggestion about keeping a journal provide the impetus that Leigh needs to learn writing skills and lead to his desire to become a "famous book writer with a beard like [Mr. Henshaw]."

Leigh matures, not only as a boy who grows to accept and love his father, but also as a writer who eventually wins honorable mention in his school's "Young Writer's Workbook."

Adaptations

Many of deary's books have been adapted to other media. Miller-Brody produced a filmstrip version of Dear Mr. Henshaw in 1984. Also available on filmstrip is Meet the Newbery Author: Beverly Cleary (Random House/MillerBrody). Among her books for younger readers, The Mouse and the Motorcycle (1965) was made into a two-part movie by Churchill Films for ABC-TV in 1987, and a film version of Runaway Ralph (1970) was completed by Churchill Films in 1988. Three of the seven Ramona books—Ramona Quimby, Age 8; Ramona and Her Mother; and Ramona Forever—served as the basis for a ten-part public television production that aired first in Canada and then in the United States in 1988.

deary's books are available in more than ten countries, and in Denmark and Sweden television programs based on the Henry Huggins series have aired. In Japan a puppet show has been adapted from The Mouse and the Motorcycle.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why are only Leigh Botts's letters included in the book? Why are there no replies from Mr. Henshaw?

2. What is Mr. Henshaw's attitude toward children who write him letters?

What is his attitude toward Leigh in particular?

3. How is the setting in Dear Mr.Henshaw important to the story?

4. Why does Angela Badger like A Day on Dad's Rig even though it is a description and not a complete story?

5. After trying so hard to catch the lunch bag thief, why does Leigh not want to know his identity?

6. Do you think Leigh would still describe himself as "the mediumest boy in the class" at the end of the book?

7. What do the monarch butterflies symbolize?

8. What is lacking in Leigh's story about the ten-foot-tall wax truck driver?

Who might the wax man represent?

9. Why is Leigh unable to finish his thank-you to his father for the twenty dollars? Why is he finally able to write the thank-you?

10. Leigh misses his dog Bandit, and when his father loses him, he feels heartsick. Why, then, when Bandit is found, does he give the dog back to his father?

11. Does the author show weaknesses in the characters of the mother and the father?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Divorce is a common ending to modern marriages. How does divorce influence Leigh's life and emotions? Is that an accurate depiction of the effects of divorce on a child?

2. Dear Mr. Henshaw is written as a series of letters and diary entries. Discuss how this format is effective or ineffective.

3. Bill Botts is shown to have both good and bad qualities. In what ways is he a good father? A bad father?

4. Bonnie Botts thinks that television viewing is "rotting" Leigh's brain. Many adults believe that television is detrimental to young viewers. Do you agree?

5. Examine the early letters and diary entries. Compare them to the later letters and diary pages. In what ways does the main character mature over the course of the book? How is this maturing process demonstrated?

6. In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain, the Widow Douglas and Aunt Sally try to "sivilize" Huck Finn, but he rejects their attempts. In Dear Mr. Henshaw, how does Bonnie Botts try to civilize Leigh? Is she successful? Was she successful at civilizing Leigh's father?

For Further Reference

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deary's editor offers more information on her childhood, writing habits, and personality.

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