

# **Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack Short Guide**

## **Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack by M. E. Kerr (Marijane Meaker)**

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="#">Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack 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="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>

## Overview

Despite its deliberately misleading title, *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* belies classification as a trendy and sensational novel of the 1970s, a decade when public outcry against drug use among youth began to surface in strength. The primary subject of the novel is not drug use, but rather the problems in human relationships that adolescents seek to escape, sometimes through selfdestructive behavior. As such, the novel ranges far beyond a simplistic morality tale about the danger of drugs.

Rather than advising readers to "just say no" to escapist behavior, the novel seems to suggest that deliberate selfevaluation and constructive communication with others may make life more meaningful. Combining humor and poignancy, Kerr creates complex adolescent characters such as Susan "Dinky" Hocker and P. John Knight, whose eccentricities reveal their burgeoning talents and deep insecurities.

Her sensitive treatment of love also departs from the stereotypical "boy meets girl" story to show how the troubled but steadily blossoming relationship between Tucker and Natalia is not based solely upon mere physical attraction but instead develops out of trust, companionship, and deep emotional need. Moreover, even though there is clear conflict between parents and children, Kerr's adults are not simply one-dimensional villains present only to challenge youthful spirit.

*Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* is, at its most basic level, a book about maturity.

Although dating, overeating, and parental pressure are essential parts of the plot, Kerr skillfully establishes these dilemmas within more permanent situations, involving choices that human beings will face throughout life. Kerr's gift lies in her ability to plumb adolescence's depths while guiding young adult readers through the threshold into adulthood.

## About the Author

Born in Auburn, New York, on May 27, 1927, M. E. Kerr (Marijane Meaker) was an avid reader as a child and spent a great deal of her free time writing stories and poems. After grade school, she attended Stuart Hall Academy in Staunton, Virginia, where she quickly established herself as a rebellious and disruptive student. She was suspended once but managed to complete high school and was accepted at the University of Missouri, where she studied English. Upon graduation, she moved to New York City and worked for E. P. Dutton, a large publishing company. At the same time, Kerr continued writing and sold her first story to the Ladies Home Journal, an accomplishment that launched her freelance writing career.

Kerr, as Ann Aldrich, wrote several adult novels in the 1950s and tried her hand at suspense fiction using the name Vin Packer. She published twenty-seven novels under the two assumed names.

Kerr wrote adult novels full-time for about twenty years, branching into adolescent fiction after reading Paul Zindel's popular young adult novel, *The Pigman*. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, her first attempt at young adult fiction, was selected as an American Library Association Notable Book in 1972. Since then, M. E. Kerr has become her "literary name," and the author, living in East Hampton, Long Island, has become a prolific and popular young adult novelist. Her 1983 autobiography, *Me, Me, Me, Me: Not a Novel*, reveals Kerr's own adolescent experiences as the source of her fiction.

# Setting

The story takes place in Brooklyn, New York, in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

Fifteen-year-old Tucker Woolf and his family have recently moved to Brooklyn from Manhattan. A status-conscious, middle-class couple, Mr. and Mrs. Woolf instruct Tucker to refer to their neighborhood as "Brooklyn Heights," thinking it sounds more prestigious than "Brooklyn." Tucker's father has just lost his job as a fundraiser and developed an allergy to cats, so Tucker is forced to give away his nine-month-old calico cat, Nader, named after consumer activist Ralph Nader.

Susan "Dinky" Hocker, an overweight fourteen-year-old, gives Nader a new home—and a new diet. To Tucker's dismay, Nader grows as fat and sluggish as Dinky. When Tucker visits Dinky to demand that she stop inflicting her problems on the cat, he meets Dinky's cousin, Natalia Line, a quiet, oldfashioned-looking girl to whom he is immediately attracted.

The story initially develops around these characters, and most of the action takes place at the homes of the Wolfs and the Hockers. Kerr provides specific street names and landmarks to locate the story in a realistic New York environment.

## Social Sensitivity

Parents and teachers will find little objectionable in *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*. Despite its title, the book's focus on drugs is more metaphorical than literal. Kerr uses the concept of addiction as a character development device.

Some adults, however, may be put off by the intense criticism the author levels at parents. With almost no exception, parents are portrayed as insensitive, childish in their superficial judgments of others, susceptible to fads, and lacking sincerity in the social concerns they profess to support. Nevertheless, the novel's complex and beautifully written conclusion makes it clear that parents, like their children, are vulnerable, irrational, and sometimes misguided, but often well-meaning, in their actions and decisions. Kerr's exposition of the conflicts and foibles that fill the book is meant to illuminate human nature in general and is not directed at parents, teen-agers, drug users, or any other specific groups.

# Literary Qualities

Kerr's literary strength lies in her ability to construct a unique and often hilarious cast of characters situated in a realistic, moving plot. In *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, she accomplishes this through convincing dialogue and illuminating symbolism. In creating the dialogue between Tucker and his peers, Kerr captures the tone and subject matter of typical adolescent conversation.

More significantly, she depicts the characters' use of alternative, indirect methods of communication. Tucker, Natalia, Dinky, and P. John often are not sure what they feel or how they wish to express themselves; they frequently say what they do not really mean in order to hide their insecurities and anxieties.

Tucker, for example, usually remains quiet but learns to express his most personal thoughts through writing and literature: he writes poems that only he reads, which help him understand his own feelings; he sends Dinky a clip from *Science Digest* and a homemade plaque bearing a Kurt Vonnegut quotation as signs of friendship; and he quotes Sylvia Plath when he tries to tell Natalia how he feels about her.

Natalia, who is also shy, inadvertently creates rhyming phrases when she is nervous, perhaps, Kerr seems to suggest, as a subconscious attempt to guard against revealing anything too personal or painful. Prompted by Tucker's "fill in the blank" method of communication, she learns to express herself more freely and fully.

Unlike Tucker and Natalia, Dinky is outspoken, telling stories about bizarre people and occurrences as a way of deflecting conversation about herself.

Dinky speaks to her parents through her own language of overeating and behaving oddly; this becomes her way of seeking their attention. Her parents, however, humor her and listen to Marcus. Only by adopting the language of her mother's most current cause, drug rehabilitation, does Dinky capture the parental attention she desires; in a defiant act of self-imposed slander designed to embarrass her mother, she proclaims in graffiti, "Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack." Kerr attaches such significance to Dinky's use of her mother's language in this scene that she uses the proclamation for her title.

P. John's vocabulary is more sophisticated than Dinky's, but his call for parental attention is voiced in similar language. Craving affection, Dinky announces that she is a heroin addict, knowing that her parents want to reform and nurture addicts. Likewise, P. John creates his identity as an extreme rightwing reactionary, knowing that his father devotes his efforts to challenging and changing conservative ideology. The personas Dinky and P. John create become their way of speaking to their parents.

Much of the dialogue contains symbolism that Kerr uses to clarify character traits and themes. Nader the cat, for example functions as an outward representation of first Tucker's, then Dinky's inner feelings: Nader is a neglected stray when Tucker first finds her, just as Tucker is a lonely newcomer to Brooklyn; while living with Dinky, Nader



becomes fat and listless, then sleek and energetic as Dinky diets and becomes friends with P. John, and later seems to go wild when Dinky finally expresses her anger and hurt.

The concept of birth and renewal is also symbolically emphasized in Kerr's novel. Natalia's name is a variation on "natal," pertaining to birth, and her attendance at the Renaissance (or rebirth) school, where she recovers from emotional trauma, alludes to the process of renewal experienced by the troubled characters in the story. These emotionally and psychologically "addicted" characters undergo figurative "rebirth therapy" in the same way that the addicts literally participate in Mrs. Hocker's encounter group therapy.





# Themes and Characters

In *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, Kenexposes the variety and psychological complexity of human relationships, focusing on the individual's need for self-respect and the consequences of ignoring this need in others.

The reader meets Susan "Dinky" Hocker, the title character of the novel, through the protagonist, Tucker Woolf.

Dinky—the daughter of Horace Hocker, an attorney, and Helen Hocker, a "dogooder" who flits from cause to cause—is an intelligent, witty girl whose weight problem stems from parental neglect.

Dinky eats heavily and frequently, and as she grows bigger and feels lonelier, she increasingly identifies with the physically grotesque social outcasts she reads about, such as John Merrick, the Elephant Man. Her mother dedicates her time to leading a drug rehabilitation encounter group, and her father, who helps with the group, is constantly busy.

Both view the reformed drug addict, Marcus, as their pet project and success story; they seem more interested in their roles as white liberals than in their daughter.

Tucker Woolf meets Dinky when he gives her his pet cat Nader. A sensitive, introspective boy, Tucker tries to befriend Dinky. Tucker spends much of his time in the library; his secret ambition is to become a librarian. After he meets Natalia Line, Dinky's cousin who lives with the Hockers, he spends less time at the library and more at Dinky's house, where he tries to get to know Natalia better. He loves to read, writes poetry, and his ability to use language creatively enables him to draw Natalia out of her shyness.

Tucker's father, Cal Woolf, a former fundraiser, goes into the health food business with Tucker's uncle, Guy Bell, whom everyone calls "Jingle." Jingle, in his early forties, has had three unsuccessful marriages and several shortlived careers in the theater. His drinking habit and irresponsibility lead to the fire that ruins the health food business.

Tucker's father, though furious with Jingle, decides to "forgive and continue"; Tucker adopts his father's philosophy of forgiveness when he encounters his own personal difficulties.

Tucker's mother, who has a doctorate in English literature, works as an editor for a cheap, sensationalistic magazine.

Embarrassed by the nature of her work, she instructs Tucker not to reveal the name of her employer. She constantly corrects Tucker's grammar and drops academic terms and artists' names as if compensating in everyday conversation for the language of her lurid magazine stories.



Both Mr. and Mrs. Woolf care about Tucker but are busy coming to terms with their own ambitions and desires.

They respond seriously to events in Tucker's life only when they hear from their peers about his activities.

Natalia Line is a fifteen-year-old girl whose life has been marked by her mother's mental illness and her father's suicide. Before living with the Hockers, she spent time at Renaissance, a center for emotionally disturbed children. Although Natalia has slowly recovered from her trauma, she has a habit of rhyming words when she gets nervous.

Gentle and considerate, she is attracted to Tucker's sensitive, generous nature.

When Tucker asks Natalia to accompany him to a dance at school, she agrees to go only if Tucker finds a date for Dinky. Tucker asks sixteen-year-old Perry John (P. John) Knight, an articulate, outspoken, overweight boy in his creative writing class, to escort Dinky. P. John and Dinky develop a friendship based, in part, on their mutual desire to lose weight. As a result of her friendship with P. John, Dinky begins to lose weight, to care for someone else, and to respect herself. Only P. John calls Dinky by her real name, Susan, rather than by the denigrating nickname that her parents consider cute. P. John Knight is a true friend to Dinky and serves as a catalyst for her final rebellion against her parents.

P. John is also, however, an abrasive, reactionary, right-wing adolescent. His father, Perry Knight, is a famous liberal writer, and P. John resents his father paying more attention to his causes than to his son. In retaliation, P. John deletes his father's name from his own, dresses conservatively, and tries to offend others with his neo-fascist opinions.

Through Kerr's development of each of these characters, *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* addresses the theme of addiction and its various manifestations. Although Marcus is the only character in the book who is a literal drug addict, each character develops a dependence on a particular substance or way of life: Dinky is addicted to food and attentiondrawing behavior; Tucker craves solitude in the library and escape through books; Mrs. Hocker needs empty altruism to fill her days and give her an identity; Mrs. Woolf depends on academic pretense to give her life legitimacy; and P. John Knight feeds on his identity as a shocking reactionary.

Kerr presents characters who try to fill a void though their various addictions.

Exhibiting the kind of behavior usually associated with junkies, they lack confidence, make excuses for themselves, and try to compensate for loss and loneliness with superficial and insincere attempts to care about others.

In order to become mature, healthy individuals, the novel suggests, these characters need to withdraw from their individual addictions and respond to each other with love and respect.

Tucker's favorite quote from *The Little Prince* summarizes this idea: "If you tame me, then we shall need each other." Most of the characters are transformed by this "taming" process in the novel, illustrating Kerr's notion that rebirth and hope result from the care and attention of others: Tucker's father gives up on his health food store and takes a job that better suits his talents; Tucker's mother tries to renew her sense of legitimacy as a scholar by going to law school; Mr. and Mrs. Woolf begin to address Dinky as Susan, and they take her on a European vacation to get to know her better; P. John sheds his angry conservatism and emerges a confident, compassionate labor leader; Tucker and Natalia learn to express their feelings for each other and are given the freedom to pursue their relationship. Although Kerr realistically depicts the extreme difficulty of breaking an addiction—to drugs, food, or hypocrisy—she ends the novel on an optimistic note, conveying the characters' renewed senses of purpose and perspective.

# Adaptations

A made-for-television movie version of *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* aired in 1979 as an ABC After School Special.

Produced by Guenette-Asselin Productions, the 30-minute film starred Wendie Jo Sperber as Dinky.



## Topics for Discussion

1. At several points in the novel, Dinky and the others describe people who act in a freakish manner, such as the boy in Natalia's school who wears his clothing backward. Yet, the book's major characters are also odd. What do you think Kerr is suggesting about the reasons for Dinky's criticisms?

2. P. John Knight likes to point out the recklessness, irrationality, and selfdefeating behavior of human beings.

Find a few meaningful instances of this in the novel. Does P. John see folly in himself?

3. Tucker's uncle "Jingle" Bell does not seem to be a major character in the plot.

What is his significance in the novel?

Whom does he affect?

4. P. John's favorite line is, "Don't understand me too quickly." What does this mean? Can you identify any characters who are understood too hastily and suffer because of it?

5. Considering her background and unusual nature, why is Natalia so fascinating to Tucker? Are they alike or different?

6. Neither Dinky nor P. John use their given names. Why is this? Are their reasons the same?

7. The novel is full of characters who choose various methods of avoiding reality. Discuss some of the substitutes that characters use to avoid the truth.

8. The marital relationships of the Hockers and Woolfs are not dealt with very much in the novel. How would you describe them?

9. Do Tucker and his parents share any similar interests?

10. Although Marcus is somewhat pathetic, he does exhibit a positive characteristic that the others seem to lack.

How would you describe it?

11. Kerr seems to portray Mr. Knight as a more admirable character than the Hockers or the Woolfs. Is he more admirable? Why or why not?

12. The cat "Nader," who is transferred from Tucker to Dinky, has a symbolic role in the story. What does he symbolize?



13. One of the rhymes Tucker creates for Natalia's amusement is "Tarrying place, burying place, marrying place."

How does this seemingly nonsensical phrase reflect on the novel's themes?

14. Why is it ironic that Mrs. Hocker receives the "Good Samaritan Award"?

Refer to the biblical story.



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In one of the few direct observations she makes in the novel, Kerr says, "There are two ways of changing. One is to become more of what you once were, and one is to become less of what you once were." Discuss this idea as it applies to the various characters in the novel's end.
2. The idea of being a "credit to the community" bothers Tucker, who says the community ought to be a credit to the individual. Apply this less common notion to the efforts that cities and villages make to improve their community life.
3. Tucker's uncle Jingle wrote a play called *Now It's My Turn to Talk*. Using this title as a key to the changes that occur in the novel and its characters, explain why the title is appropriate.
4. In chapter 7, P. John summarizes his short story "Answered Prayers," which paints a peculiar and grim portrait of the future, including a drugaddicted society. After considering P. John's prediction, discuss how accurate the story may be and what specific trends today might lead to the future P. John envisions.
5. *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* is very much a product of the 1970s in terms of its social concerns. Discuss the elements you believe to be typical reflections of the 1970s.

## For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something about the Author*. Vol. 20. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976. Contains a general encyclopedic survey of Kerr's career, including a selection of comments on her work from reviewers.

Janeczke, Paul. "An Interview with M. E. Kerr." *English Journal* (December 1975): 75-77. Focuses mainly upon Kerr's methods and style. Presents little material on the content of her novels.

Kingsbury, Mary. "The Why of People: The Novels of M. E. Kerr." *Horn Book* 53 (June 1977): 288-295. A solid article viewing Kerr as a mainstream literary figure dealing in problems of human behavior, conscience, family relationships, and notions of love.

Kingsbury praises the substance of Kerr's novels but has reservations about the author's ability to construct characters.





# 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