

The Divorce Express Short Guide

The Divorce Express by Paula Danziger

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Overview

As the title suggests, this book is about divorce. It is told from the point of view of a teen-ager trying to adapt to the lives of parents in two different locations. Watching her confront the problem of her parents' divorce, their dating other people, and her position within all these relationships is like viewing a juggling act. Not only must the main character, Phoebe, cope with her parents, as she adapts to a new school and new friends where she lives with her father in Woodstock, but she also tries to retain contact with her previous friends in her mother's city of New York.

However, the book does not deal only with serious subjects. Phoebe's exciting relationship with her new boyfriend is one of several challenges she faces, including a visiting female raccoon and coping with her mother's hateful fiancé. There are many puns and one-liner jokes to enjoy, and all readers will cheer Phoebe's creative approach to dealing with crummy food at the school cafeteria. Like most teenagers, Phoebe finds life at once troublesome and thrilling, supplying her with many questions but not many answers.

Phoebe Brooks is a normal ninth grader who wants a normal life. But Phoebe does not stand a chance of living peacefully, not with one parent living in New York City, and one in Woodstock, and her having to travel back and forth between the two every weekend. Phoebe gets through it all playing her word game—she takes words and rearranges the letters to new effects. On the first page of the book, she discovers the word PARENTS can be rearranged as ENTRAPS, describing her feelings exactly.

After living with her wealthy mother in the city for a time, Phoebe is staying with her father. As an artist, he fits in well with the unusually creative atmosphere of Woodstock. Phoebe really enjoys her new home and closer relationship with her father Jim, but she misses her New York City friends and sometimes suffers guilt when she thinks of her mother being alone. Balancing the needs of her parents is exhausting, as is riding the bus back and forth each weekend. The Divorce Express, as the bus comes to be called, is a real drag until Phoebe meets a new friend, Rosie. They have parent problems in common—Rosie visits her father in New York City each weekend.

Before long, Phoebe's New York friends seem to have forgotten her, and she is less than thrilled when her mother announces that she will marry a man Phoebe despises. Suddenly the girls discover that Rosie's mother, Mindy, and Jim have been dating on the weekends the girls are gone, and the friends happily face the possibility that they may become stepsisters. But they are kept busy with more pressing problems.

Phoebe's big city experience demands that she take a leading part in the school cafeteria food campaign, and she also has her new boyfriend Dave to worry about. But with a little help from all the important people in her life, by the final page of the book, Phoebe realizes DIVORCES can be rearranged to DISCOVER. It is all part of the game to keep Phoebe sane, and to help her in her attempt to find peace while riding the Divorce Express.

About the Author

Paula Danziger attributes many of the ideas for her young adult stories to her own childhood and also to her experience as an English teacher.

She taught at the junior high and high school level and was also a college counselor before she chose writing as a full-time career. She has said that everything in her life offers a connection to her writing, and she has certainly managed to "connect" with her young reading audience in her novels. She deals very directly with the tough problems young people face today, such as poor self-image and surviving divorce. Her novel, *There's a Bat in Bunk Five* is a sequel to the very popular *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, dealing with the same character who is far from the perfect "ideal" of a teen-ager.

Danziger's characters are honest and open, and her familiar style employing puns and abundant humor is one which delights her readers. She resides part time in New York City, traveling back and forth to Woodstock, the setting of some of her novels. Danziger's approach of allowing her characters to relate their own stories continues to prove extremely popular as her books attract new readers each year.

Setting

The book's action is split between Woodstock, New York and New York City, depending upon which parent Phoebe is with. Woodstock means peace and safety while the big city Phoebe once thought of as home quickly becomes foreign and somehow threatening. She travels between the two on the Divorce Express, a bus which carries many children in the same situation every weekend. Living in two places can be very disorienting, and Phoebe has a hard time thinking of either place as her true home.

Social Sensitivity

There is little in this book which will bother young readers. Rosie's heritage is racially mixed; her mother is white and her father black, but this situation is introduced early on in Danziger's typical no-nonsense fashion. Rosie and Phoebe mention the idea of parents having sex and also discuss problems that can arise over practicing religion within split families, all in a very realistic context. There is nothing gratuitous or forced about these discussions.



Literary Qualities

The normal overabundance of puns and jokes, Danziger's trademarks, are present in this work. She also provides an interesting "peek" at Phoebe's bus log, which shows how many hours and miles per year are spent riding buses.

Phoebe's word game, in which she rearranges letters in words to form new ones, will appeal to young readers.

Phoebe's story is told in the first person, present tense, and most readers will like the immediacy of the main character's thoughts. This technique unfortunately leaves a few of the other characters somewhat "flat," but Danziger's parent characters have a tendency to be presented in a less than complementary fashion. Considering her intended audience, this technique is understandable. Her style is realistic and confrontational without being offensive, and most of all, it echoes a sense of humor, a good way to handle many types of problems.



Themes and Characters

The overriding theme of this work is the effects of divorce as experienced by its obvious victims, the children involved. The fact that it is very much a continuous experience, a process which must be constantly worked upon, is emphasized. Phoebe has managed to pass through the first stages of anger and denial, by accepting the differences between her parents. But the technical problems their separation causes are examined minutely, from separation from one group of friends during the week to missing out on weekend activities with the "home" group, to dealing with prospective step-parents.

Another theme of the book, that of friendship and support, shows how Phoebe is able to cope. Her parents find supportive people and so does Phoebe when she meets Rosie, a fellow sufferer. The positive aspect of such a relationship is well presented, and Rosie helps Phoebe in a way her parents cannot. When Rosie tells Phoebe all the books about divorce are "mostly for the kids who are just starting it," readers know Danziger is trying to remedy that situation with her work.

Phoebe undergoes all the insecurity about boyfriends and school which one might expect. She loves her father and the country atmosphere of their Woodstock home, even though she sometimes feels badly that he has to pinch pennies to live the artist's life he has chosen following the divorce. Her wealthier mother and her expensive big city apartment and lifestyle become a bit threatening to Phoebe. She is nervous about attending a new school and hesitant to become involved in the social side of school because she knows she will be gone every weekend, visiting her mother.

But she cannot resist becoming a part of the school "revolt" against the terrible cafeteria food it provides. The students of Woodstock organize to protest the conditions and Phoebe leads the group. She meets Dave, a cute fellow high school student, and their relationship quickly becomes something she has only dreamed about before, leaving her a bit confused. As she confides to Rosie, "I kind of like Dave, a lot."

Their first date proves very special, and Phoebe wonders how their relationship might develop.

Her relationship with her mother is as shaky as the one with her father is strong. Phoebe is a strong person herself; however, her mother's announcement that she will marry Duane whom Phoebe despises tests everyone's equilibrium. Phoebe finds a great deal of support in her new best friend, Rosie, and manages to retain an optimistic outlook under less than desirable circumstances.

Rosie visits her remarried father and stepfamily in New York City on weekends. She is a likeable young lady who helps Phoebe adapt not only to her new Woodstock school but to some aspects of divorce Phoebe has not yet had to face, such as the remarriage of a parent. In addition to being a fine traveling companion, Rosie becomes someone in whom Phoebe can trust her finest dreams and her worst fears. If Rosie's mother, Mindy, and Phoebe's father, Jim, marry, the two girls will make devoted stepsisters. They have



already purchased a shirt together which they take turns wearing; why not have it in one house?

Mindy is everything Phoebe's mother is not, making her immediately attractive to Phoebe's father, Jim. Both of these Woodstock parents are creative and spontaneous, providing some warmth for their often confused daughters. While supportive of the girls, both must deal with their own problems of loneliness and adjustment in the face of divorce and their spouse remarrying.

They do not spoil their children; Jim will not allow Phoebe to keep a pet raccoon, and Mindy teaches her daughter about living on a decreased income.

Mrs. Brooks, Phoebe's mother, and Rosie's father are the "rich other parents" who must be dealt with on weekends. Rosie's stepfamily does not make her feel included, and her father seems to spend more money on his "new" children. By marrying Duane, whom Phoebe nicknames "Plastic Pop," Mrs. Brooks informs Phoebe that her own life is very important to her too. She is conciliatory in the question of Phoebe's weekend visits, allowing her eventually to visit every other weekend in order to allow Phoebe some social life in Woodstock.

Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think the book's title is a good one? Explain.
2. Do you like it that Phoebe's and Rosie's parents might marry? Why or why not?
3. In literary works, different locations often symbolize certain feelings of the characters. Discuss the way Woodstock and New York City do this.
4. Is it realistic of Phoebe to think her relationship can remain the same with her New York friends?
5. Do you think one of Phoebe's parents is "good" and one "bad?" Why or why not?
6. How does Rosie's friendship help Phoebe?
7. What does the problem with school cafeteria food teach Phoebe about life in general?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Are any of the characters in the story completely "good" or completely "bad?" Discuss four of the characters, giving examples to support your theory.

2. Phoebe is very unhappy about her mother's remarriage. How might she actually benefit from it in the future?

Has she already benefitted in some way?

3. Discuss the use of first-person present tense narration. How does it strengthen or weaken the main ideas of the book?

4. At one point, Rosie tells Phoebe that all the books about divorce are "mostly for the kids who are just starting it." How does her comment reflect upon this book?

For Further Reference

Chevalier, Tracy, ed. *Twentieth Century Children Writers*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989. Lists Danziger's publications, presents a brief biography, and briefly reviews her books.

Related Titles

The following Danziger novels also feature the attempts of teen-age girls to establish their identities as they leave childhood behind: *The Cat Ate My Gynsuit*, *The Pistachio Prescription*, *Can You Sue Your Parents for Malpractice?*, and *There's a Bat in Bunk Five*.



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