

Don't Call It Paradise Short Guide

Don't Call It Paradise by Gayle Pearson

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Overview

Don't Call It Paradise deals with a young girl's summer crush and her realization that appearances can be deceiving. Thirteen-year-old Maddie travels to San Francisco to visit her best friend, Beanie, who recently moved with her family from the Illinois neighborhood where the two girls grew up. Maddie has always loved Beanie's family—idolized them in fact—and her mixed feelings about Beanie's "bad boy" brother Buddy quickly escalate into a crush.

Buddy had been a troublemaker, Maddie knew, and she knew that he and Beanie had always been at odds; Beanie always claimed that Buddy was cruel to her and that her parents placed her brother on a pedestal and left her feeling inadequate and unloved.

When Maddie arrives in San Francisco, Buddy appears to have changed. He is sixteen now and adorable, and Maddie finds herself falling for him and thrust into the midst of conflicting loyalties. Maddie is going through a transition in life; she has just graduated from middle school, and she longs to expand her horizons and experience the exciting life that Buddy and the McBeans appear to offer her. But Buddy reveals his true nature that summer, and Dennis and Marie McBean, Buddy and Beanie's parents, fall far short of being the ideal family Maddie imagined. Pearson highlights Maddie's revelations as Maddie works through a blocked memory about Buddy which surfaces over the summer and haunts her thoughts and dreams. Gradually the memory returns. By the end of the summer, Maddie has discovered the truth about Buddy and his parents, and she has learned the importance of loyalty, trust, and family relationships.

About the Author

Born in 1947 in Chicago, Illinois, Gayle Pearson always loved writing. She studied journalism at Northern Illinois University, then changed her major to English and graduated in 1970. She attended San Jose State University in 1976 and 1977. Pearson planned to teach, but discovered that teaching was not the career for her. She worked as an editor, then a social worker, but continued to write, writing her first story for young adults in 1973. In addition to books, Pearson writes articles for newspapers and magazines, and often sets her stories in the Midwest, where she grew up. Pearson today lives in the San Francisco Bay area and writes stories, both historical and contemporary, about the dynamics of family relationships.

Setting

Pearson's novel is set in the San Francisco Bay Area at the country home of the McBean family and on the sunny California beaches close to the city. Beanie and Buddy McBean and their parents appear to live an idyllic life there, and California seems so sharply in contrast to the boring Midwestern town in Illinois where Maddie lives.

Maddie visits the McBeans during the summer, and everything about their world enthralls her. Pearson uses the California setting to highlight the idealized notion Maddie has of the McBeans, and Maddie imagines the beach, the sprawling home, and the adventurous life the McBeans seem to lead as part of scenes from her *Seventeen* magazines.

Until Maddie learns better, California seems just like paradise. But paradise, it appears, is fraught with danger. Pearson sets several scenes of the novel in treacherous water. In Maddie's memories, the water swirled within a quarry, and in her present stay in California, the water rushed forcefully into sea caves. Water, too, can put up false appearances. It can cleanse and drown, purify and destroy. Just like the McBeans, the waters in Pearson's novel offer fun and adventure, but they harbor destructive power.



Social Sensitivity

Pearson's novel deals with relationships— between friends, between siblings, between boyfriends and girlfriends, and between parents and their children. All these, relationships are ones that teenagers struggle to understand and maintain. Pearson highlights different kinds of relationships by drawing contrasts between them. Dennis and Marie relate much differently toward Buddy than they do toward Beanie, for instance, and Maddie relates much differently toward her parents than the McBean children do toward theirs. It is important that Maddie learn what she wants and needs out of her relationships, and living in a home where the dynamics among family members differ drastically from her own, she is able to determine what brings satisfaction and what creates unrest. At the beginning of the novel Maddie is dissatisfied with her parents, but by the end she has reevaluated the relationship she has with them and come to value it deeply. Though Pearson never states this, we understand that Maddie likely will reevaluate the relationship she has with her sister as well.

Maddie sees how Beanie relates to Buddy, and she witnesses the destruction their actions cause. She also learns about the nature of friendship and the importance of trust and understanding. Maddie expects different things from the people in her life at the beginning of the novel than she does at the end.

That Maddie fails for a long time to recognize the problems at the McBeans is understandable. We all look at people we admire and fail to see their faults. We tend to idealize situations when they offer us something we are missing at home. Beanie hates that her parents fail to hang up her artwork, but Maddie considers this a mark of their refined collectors' taste. And for a while at least, Maddie wants nothing more than for her parents to be more refined, more worldly. True, the McBeans may give Maddie a taste of new worlds and provide her with more excitement than she has at home, but Maddie learns that they cannot provide emotional support. For a while Maddie is as blind to the McBeans' faults as the McBeans are blind to Buddy's. The McBeans are also blind to Beanie's unhappiness, and Maddie recognizes that this has caused Beanie to struggle with feelings of inadequacy that will take a long time to overcome.

After Maddie regains her memory she sees how deeply relationships can influence behavior and how easily judgment gets clouded. Readers of Pearson's novels will identify with Maddie's attraction to Buddy and with the McBeans, and they will understand her desire to ignore what she does not want to see. But Maddie has gut feelings she learns not to ignore. Perhaps teenagers identify with Maddie because all teenagers seek approval and all struggle to gain self-confidence. By the end of the book, Maddie has gained the confidence she needs to recognize gut feelings and trust them; she no longer feels she has to prove anything or pass anyone's test but her own.

Literary Qualities

During the course of the novel, Maddie grows and changes, but everyone else remains virtually the same. By telling the story from Maddie's point of view, Pearson allows the reader to identify with Maddie, understand the other characters as she understands them, and watch her grow. As Maddie's views change, Beanie becomes worthy of praise and Buddy becomes more contemptible. Neither one of them changes; Maddie simply learns to recognize their true selves.

Buddy remains an enigma for a while in the book, as Maddie tries to figure him out and she pieces together her broken memory of Mambo's death. Perhaps it is significant too that we never get a clear picture of Maddie's parents. Maddie herself does not have one; her captivation with the McBeans does not allow her to open up to her own parents and recognize their virtues. Pearson could have revealed more about Maddie's parents even though they were not present in California, but she chose instead to concentrate on the McBeans. In Maddie's mind, the McBeans seem alive and multi-dimensional and her own parents seem flat.

In order for Maddie to grow, she must unblock her memory and clear her mind of preconceived notions. Pearson accomplishes this by interweaving the past with the present. Maddie sees glimpses of the old Buddy throughout her stay in California, and each glimpse stimulates memories she finds painful to face. When Pearson brings the plot full circle, she allows Maddie to save Beanie.

Though Maddie does not realize it, she relives the incident with Mambo and now can come to terms with it.



Themes and Characters

Don't Call It Paradise deals with the idealized views adolescents often have of their friends and their friends' families and with the power struggles that often complicate parent and sibling relationships. Maddie idolizes the McBeans, and she longs to be a part of this family she considers so worldly and wise, so fun and exotic. The McBeans make her own family seem dull, and at thirteen, Maddie longs for adventure. Her family eats meat loaf, the McBeans eat curry.

Her family reads the local paper, the McBeans read the New York Times. When Maddie visits the McBeans in their new home, she gets a taste of the excitement they have to offer. They are kind to Beanie and they are fun. But by the end of her vacation, she discovers that things are not always as they seem, and that people are often blind to what they do not want to see.

Maddie is a typical adolescent girl in many ways, and her desire for excitement is far from unusual. However, Beanie McBean, Maddie's friend, does not share Maddie's zest for adventure. Beanie lacks confidence and is hesitant to take chances, and Maddie comes to realize that Beanie's insecurities stem from dysfunctional family relationships. It is odd that Maddie and Beanie are such good friends because they seem to have little in common. Maddie is witty and smart and has a flare for adventure, as does Beanie's brother, Buddy. Maddie wants desperately for Buddy to recognize those qualities about her. Wildly attracted to him, and to his parents, she invests more effort into bonding with Buddy and his parents than she does in bonding with Beanie. In fact, Maddie is jealous of Beanie's new house in California and for being part of a family and lifestyle she wants for her own. She envies her for what she has rather than appreciating her for what she is.

Because she so idealizes them, Maddie does not recognize the dysfunction in the McBean family. Beanie's parents obviously favor Buddy over Beanie, and they fail to see how destructive their behavior is to both children. Beanie tells Maddie that her parents never appreciate her or support her and that she can never live up to her brother.

Buddy tells Maddie that his parents think he "walks on water." Maddie knows deep down that no one should worship their son as the McBeans do, but as she becomes more and more enamored of Buddy, she begins to worship him in much the same way, which leads her to downplay the injustice in her mind.

However witty and smart Maddie may be, at thirteen she is easily fooled by false appearances and easily swayed by false ideals. Beanie's family life is anything but ideal, and Maddie faces the challenge of recognizing this while struggling to maintain her old friendship with Beanie and a new relationship with Buddy. Beanie and Buddy are constantly at odds and they always have been, so it is difficult for Maddie to ally herself to both of them without appearing to choose sides. Knowing that Buddy has always



treated Beanie cruelly she still finds herself irresistibly drawn to him, and she feels guilty about this. Maddie feels like "a traitor conspiring with the enemy."

When Buddy, Beanie, and Maddie go for a bike ride, Buddy urges the girls to go dangerously fast, and Beanie falls off her bike. Her parents blame her for being clumsy. Maddie knows that this is unfair, but she is caught up in the excitement of living with this dynamic family and she has convinced herself that Dennis and Marie are worldly and wise.

Beanie continually berates herself, and Buddy further downgrades Beanie to Maddie, winning Maddie over by complimenting her and making her feel that he admires her courage—and that she is a lot like him.

Buddy tells Maddie that Beanie is "a mess."

He says that she is afraid of everything, "of trying new things, of taking chances." "You know why you and I didn't end up in the bushes like Beanie?" he asks her. "Because we weren't afraid of crashing in the first place." Maddie is more flattered by Buddy's compliment than offended by his remarks about Beanie, and the reader gets the message that Buddy knows exactly how to manipulate her. Maddie cannot see past Buddy's good looks and her inflated opinion of him. In addition, she is beginning to find his daredevil attitude dangerously appealing. Exhilarated by being with the McBeans and flattered by Buddy's attention, Maddie finds Beanie's insecurity increasingly unappealing.

Buddy is a master at manipulation, and he knows how much power he has because he has been so successful manipulating his parents. They appear to like his bad boy image and they seem to be amused by his antics. It is easy to see why Maddie falls for Buddy's tricks, given the fact that she admires his parents so much and she knows how highly they think of him. But it is also typical of a teenager experiencing her first crush to hang onto everything her boyfriend says and does. Maddie starts hating Beanie in a way. She is critical of her faults, and she tries to set herself in opposition to her. Maddie, like any other teenager in love, starts seeing life through Buddy's eyes.

She loves that he thinks she can be a daredevil. She admires his silver tongue and his zest for life. She even tells herself he looks like a god.

Just when Maddie begins to believe that her relationship with Buddy may be taking off, she discovers that he is selling stolen bikes, a "business" Buddy's parents either are unaware of or, as Pearson implies, choose to ignore. People often block things from their mind that they would rather not deal with, and Pearson makes this a theme in her novel by letting us know that Maddie has been doing this too. Maddie has suppressed a memory of a bad incident from the past, one that involves Buddy, his dog Mambo, and herself back in Illinois. The reader has learned that Mambo drowned and Buddy was probably responsible, but not what Maddie had to do with Mambo's death—only that she is haunted by bad feelings about what happened. By refusing to recognize that Buddy is as callous as Pearson shows him to be, Maddie too is ignoring what she does



not want to see. Pearson makes it clear that Maddie must learn the truth about what happened with Mambo in order to recognize problems in the McBeans' relationships.

Maddie is at a crossroads in life, in some ways longing to grow up and in other ways needing to be a child. Typical of adolescent girls, she is worried about appearances, and the more she likes Buddy, the more self-conscious she becomes in front of him.

Maddie wants to look good to Buddy and his parents, and she readily admits that "impressing the McBeans was always [her] primary goal." She also wants to impress Buddy's older friends, and she wants to be able to tell people back in Illinois that she has a boyfriend in California. At one point, Pearson lets us know that Maddie is troubled by her changing attitude and she misses the time when having a best friend was the best thing in the world. But she finds herself wanting something more than that, and it scares her. She finds herself pulling away from Beanie. She is not sure exactly what she wants, and deep down she realizes that she should not want what she sees.

Buddy continues to flatter and manipulate Maddie, and Maddie finds herself taking dangerous chances that summer in her attempt to get close to him. She goes on a dangerous motorcycle ride with him, and she finds it both terrifying and thrilling.

Just as they did on the bike ride when Beanie fell in the bushes, they go too fast, tempt fate, and end up taking a fall and getting bruised. Rather than blame Buddy for the fall, however, Maddie writes off the mishap as an accident, just as the McBean's did with Beanie's accident on the bike ride.

Maddie is quickly falling into Buddy's way of thinking, and she begins to associate danger with fun. Maddie says she was "super high" from the motorcycle ride, and though she knows she could have died, she also knows that it was so thrilling she would do it again in a second. Pearson must recognize that this is an easy trap for a young girl to fall into. Pearson gives Maddie the insight she needs to recognize that Buddy's act is not one she wants to follow, but this insight does not come to her for quite a while. After the motorcycle ride, Maddie feels exhilarated and proud of herself for passing Buddy's "test."

This test appears to be what defines his true character, and his insensitive behavior is what triggers Maddie's memories of the past. More and more she sees glimpses of Buddy's old self. Up until this time, Maddie had only remembered pieces of what happened with Mambo in Illinois. She finally sees the entire picture when she attends a beach party with Buddy and his friends.

Though Maddie goes to the party with Beanie, she takes off with Buddy and the McBeans dog, Hula. They hike up a cliff, then Buddy once again tempts fate by getting dangerously close to the edge. He talks about hang gliding off those cliffs and says that he is not afraid of anything. This disturbs Maddie, but what disturbs her more is the realization that she is truly frightened up there on the cliff and beginning to remember why. Maddie remembers that she was with Buddy the day that Mambo died, just as she suspected, and that they were up on a cliff then, too. Spinning from the height and



haunted by her disturbing memory, Maddie finally asks Buddy exactly what happened with Mambo that day. She needs him to clarify it for her, and he refuses to tell her. But his behavior with her and Hula on the cliff stimulates the memory on its own.

Buddy threw Mambo off the cliff, and Maddie remembers the fear in Mambo's eyes, and how the dog grasped at her frantically when they were struggling together to stay, above the water. She tried to save the dog, but could not. Maddie remembers how she stood by Buddy's side and stood up for him when he told his parents a story that made him look like a hero rather than a killer. When this memory returns, Maddie sees that Buddy has not changed at all. A leopard does not change his spots. Now she knows that Buddy is a killer, and that no one knows it but her. It hurts her to think that she could have fallen for someone like Buddy and failed to see how cruel he was.

When Maddie asks Buddy why he threw Mambo off the cliff, he answers very matter-of-factly, "to see what she was made of.

You know the old saying," Buddy explains, "You sink or you swim."

Maddie and Buddy return to the beach, and Maddie, now released from her mental block, sees things about Buddy she chose to ignore before. This is not paradise at all, she realizes. Nothing about the McBeans world is.

A near-tragedy further drives home the lesson. Maddie had been telling Beanie that she did not try hard enough with her brother, and that she had to try not to antagonize him. Annoyed by Beanie's insecurities, Maddie told her to try not to be afraid of everything, and that she needed to have more self-confidence and be a little more daring. Buddy now wants to go in some sea caves, even though the tide is coming in and he knows this could lead to trouble.

Maddie, still a thrill seeker, wants to go in the caves but knows better—and she no longer feels that she has to impress Buddy.

Beanie, however, feels desperate to prove that she is strong. She wants to impress Buddy, and the only way to do it is to put herself in danger. Beanie does go in the caves, even though she cannot swim. "You either sink or you swim," Buddy had said.

Now it is Beanie who feels she must pass Buddy's test. And Maddie thinks this is all her fault.

Pearson brings the plot full circle. Knowing that she must save Beanie, in Maddie's mind she is back in Illinois, in the water with Mambo struggling to survive. She goes in the cave to rescue Beanie while Buddy remains "frozen in place, white as death."

Everyone at the caves that day recognizes the danger, and they know that Beanie may quite likely drown. Maddie jumps into the water and swims out to rescue Beanie, but the water is moving too fast. Maddie feels like she is going to die, just like she felt with Mambo. Fortunately, things work out differently this time. The next thing Maddie knows they are in the hospital, and everyone is all right.



But just as he did after Mambo's death, Buddy lies to his parents about what happened, and just as before, his parents believe him. Maddie finds out that Buddy told his parents that the incident was all her fault—that Maddie insisted Beanie go into the caves and that Buddy was the one to save her. Dennis and Marie, still refusing to recognize their son's failures, shun Maddie after this, and Beanie believes that Buddy is her hero.

Maddie does not go to the McBeans with the truth, nor does she tell Beanie about what happened that day. Beanie is so happy that her brother came to her rescue that Maddie feels she cannot burst her bubble.

But Maddie now can accept the injustice and recognize the error of her ways. She too had become blind, just as Buddy's parents had. She too had failed to recognize the elements that characterize healthy relationships and the elements that characterize destructive ones. Maddie knows that she will tell Beanie what happened someday because she owes it to her to tell her the truth. So it appears that Maddie has passed Buddy's "test." She survived the water, swam to safety, and emerged a better person.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think Dennis and Marie play favorites with their children?
2. Before Maddie comes to understand Buddy's true nature, what is it that attracts her to him?
3. Do you think that Dennis and Marie had an idea that Buddy may in fact be doing something wrong when Maddie mentioned the shack in the woods?

Why or why not?

4. After her experience with Buddy, do you think Maddie will continue to find "bad boys" attractive?
5. Do you think Maddie has more in common with Beanie or with Buddy?
6. What do you think Dennis and Marie will do when and if they find out the truth about Buddy? How will they react to him then? What about Beanie—what do you think her reaction will be?
7. Why do you suppose Maddie chose not to say anything to the McBeans about Buddy's lies? Do you think she was right in keeping quiet?
8. Maddie suppressed her memory of what happened with Mambo because the incident was so disturbing. Can you pinpoint exactly what it was that made it so disturbing that Maddie had to shut it out of her mind? Was it simply the horrible death of a dog she loved? Was it Buddy's involvement in Mambo's death? Was it her own involvement?

Think about the necessity we all have to reconcile right and wrong.

9. Do you think Maddie is a good friend to Beanie?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Describe Maddie's opinions of Beanie and Buddy at the beginning of the novel and her opinions of them at the end. Do these characters change during the novel, or is it only Maddie who changes?
2. Using the relationship between Maddie and Beanie as an example, write a paper on friendship and explain how you think Maddie and Beanie's relationship fits into your idea of what a good friendship should be.
3. Compare and contrast Beanie's personality with Buddy's, explaining why you believe they think and act the way they do.
4. Identify the types of incidents that occur in the book that trigger Maddie's memory of Mambo's death. Explain how each of these incidents leads her to remember what happened.
5. Write a persuasive paper explaining the importance of following your intuition.
6. Compare and contrast the relationship Maddie has with her parents and Buddy has with his.
7. Using Buddy's test, "you sink or you swim," explain who in the novel takes this test and who passes it. Why do you think so?

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