The Education of Robert Nifkin Short Guide

The Education of Robert Nifkin by Daniel Pinkwater

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Overview

The Education of Robert Nifkin is a very funny novel about distinctly unfunny subjects. Nifkin encounters anti-Semitic, communist witch hunts, insane teachers, cruel and duplicitous school administrators, and young people who, like himself, cannot fit into their schools or their neighborhoods, and for whom home is often a wasteland of intellectual sterility. The Education of Robert Nifkin is one of the most serious of Pinkwater's many funny novels because underlying the humor is an account of how a generation of children could be alienated from their parents and the society they are supposedly being groomed to enter. The novel, despite cruel topics and serious social concerns, is ultimately upbeat in temper and tone.

Nifkin is an active agent who does not just allow evil to be done to him. With the help of a community of misfits and some cynical but openhearted adults, he overcomes the social limitations constricting his life, discovers a wonderful world of urban activity around him, and triumphantly gives himself the education school has failed to provide by studying on his own and pursuing his intellectual interests in libraries and coffee houses. Society still has much to offer Nifkin, in spite of a very bad educational system, and he finds some of it with help from his friends.

About the Author

Daniel Pinkwater looks like many of the main characters of his novels—not particularly tall, chubby, bespectacled, and somewhat odd—and he has made it his career to write about eccentric children and young adults, people who, as in his own case, do not quite fit into school or the ordinary activities of daily life. These offcenter young people usually gravitate to others like themselves to form tiny groups within the larger communities of schools and neighborhoods. These creative oddballs, regardless of their circumstances, always author their own adventures, seeing the action through to the end as the key actors in their personal dramas. Wilkie Collins, the nineteenth-century author of some terrific thrillers, once asserted that an author's job was to find the romance in everyday life. This means finding the-amazing-in-the-ordinary by those who have eyes to see; it is also a key aspect of Pinkwater's fiction. His protagonists may be ordinary kids, but they uncover amazing places and people, usually right where they live, and they sometimes discover Daniel Pinkwater Self Portrait, 1982 themselves to be also amazing.

Daniel Manus Pinkwater was born on November 15, 1941 in Memphis, Tennessee, to Philip and Fay (nee Hoffman) Pinkwater, a rag collector and a chorus girl. He grew up in Chicago, and his love for that city is evident in fiction such as The Education of Robert Nifkin. He seems to know where all the really interesting parts of Chicago are, as well as the best places to hang out. An avid reader as a youngster, particularly of adventure stories, Pinkwater contemplated becoming a writer, eventually rejecting the idea because "Writer's lives are disgusting, and writing is a horrible unhealthy activity". He attended Bard College in New York, decided to become a sculptor, and only turned to writing after four years of art study, graduating in 1964.

Pinkwater began his career as a professional writer almost by accident. He had made some drawings for a book envisioned for children, and he decided that dealing with someone else writing the text would be more annoying than writing the text himself. Even after the publication of this book, The Terrible Roar (1970), he still saw himself as a sculptor and illustrator. Nevertheless, he continued to write texts for his illustrations until he reached the point of being pulled so deeply into the creation of stories that he became a full-time writer. To this day he continues to illustrate most of his books.

Pinkwater married Jill Miriam Schultz on October 12, 1969, and they live in Hyde Park, New York. Pinkwater has been a commentator since 1987 for All Things Considered on National Public Radio; his often hilarious observations have won him a large audience. Although he has occasionally had small exhibitions of his art works, it is his fiction that has won him the most notice. Lizard Music (1976) was named an American Library Association notable book; Fat Men from Space (1977) was a Junior Literary Guild selection; The Last Guru (1978; see separate entry, Vol. 9) was named an Outstanding Book by the New York Times; and The Wuggie Norple Story (1980, illustrated by Tomie de Paola) received a Children's Choice award from the International Reading Association.

Setting

"You don't look right to me. You're not a little god-damn Commie, by any chance?" his homeroom teacher Mrs. Kukla asks Robert Nifkin. This harangue epitomizes the world of his high school, situated as it is in the Eisenhower 1950s, with the Cold War hot and the country haunted by hunts everywhere for communist subversives, including daily and bizzare hunts in Nifkin's high school. Mrs. MacAllister, his English teacher, adds to these hunts for communists her own perverse twist that Jews are also to be feared, "And Jews want to destroy our traditional values. They are sexual deviants, and they spread pornography." This adds greatly to the Jewish Nifkin's discomfort at school.

Then there is Mrs. Sweet, the biology teacher, who talks to her plants, ignores her students, and conducts one of the most disgusting frog dissection labs in history. All this has Nifkin wondering, "Was there an international crazy-ladies conspiracy?"

The only bona fide communist at the high school is Sergeant Gunter, the man who runs the school's ROTC unit, and who warns his students about the evils of commissioned officers. He is eventually turned in by one of his students, then arrested and jailed. He is the only teacher Nifkin likes, and his arrest ends any interest Nifkin has in attending school; he is unpopular with the other students and his few friends are people outside of school.

He eventually stops attending classes and starts helping deliver fake "antiques" to buyers who do not seem to care that they are blatantly obvious frauds. He notes that his parents, who wallow in their incredibly bad taste in home furnishings, would love the ornate fabrications. Home can only be better than school, but this is damning with faint praise since home is still an alienating place. Nifkin's father is forever hassling him about not being manly, calling him a "sissy boy" and other demeaning names.

His perambulations outside of school allow him to discover some of the wonders of Chicago, a city with eccentric characters, strange coffee houses, fascinating art galleries, and wondrous architecture. After he is reported as a truant and forced to return to his school, he is introduced by a friend to Wheaton School, a private institution housed in a great old mansion where abuse and harsh discipline are nonexistent, students and teachers can meet in the dead of night, and everyone earns good grades. Even Jeremy Holtz, a goodhearted but very simpleminded young man, does well enough to go to Princeton.

Social Sensitivity

The Education of Robert Nifkin is a social comedy, that is it derives its laughs from showing the absurdities of social conventions, in this case those that apply to schooling in America. Although the era for the novel's events is the 1950s, young people and adults are likely to recognize some of the problems Nifkin faces: teachers who do not care about teaching, hostile school administrators, a coercive student body life in which normal students enforce conformity via ostracism, and a daily routine so rigid that students have no chance to explore their interests and to develop depth of knowledge in any given subject. Instead of just pointing out the absurdities of life in Riverview High School, which are funny enough, Pinkwater offers the contrast of a school that is the opposite of Riverview. Wheaton School has almost no discipline beyond a tacit understanding among its students that no one will be allowed to ruin a good thing. The chaos of Wheaton School is likely to differ from what many people would think a school should be, which may be part of its point. The grades at Wheaton are faked, its students attend only enough to meet minimum legal requirements, and its students gain entrance to college on the basis of records that are inaccurate. Wheaton School does have notable faults, but it at least affords students chances to learn freely and to see how real life mixes with academics. When Nifkin finishes his long essay for the admission application for St. Leon's College, he has shown that he may be better prepared for college by having attended a school with a benevolent administration and teachers who actually shared their student's lives. The relaxed approach to education may be imperfect, yet better than the stern discipline of Riverview.

In The Education of Robert Nifkin, Pinkwater also touches on social issues of the 1950s—ones that may be unfamiliar to his readers. Nifkin's father is an emigre from Poland, a refugee from his own people as well as from the Nazis. He and his wife are somewhat representative of a generation shaped by the desperate times of World War II. Their love for all sorts of expensive kitsch, which alienates Nifkin, is an emotional response to an era of fear and deprivation, and it is their way of celebrating a prosperous American life. From the way they are presented in the novel, it seems almost inevitable that a gap between generations would form, since neither they nor their son can help the way they respond to American life. Each side could use more understanding; the son could make a better effort to visualize how his parents' lives were formed by extraordinary times, and they could try to realize that their son is almost untouched by the forces that dominated them.

The outrageous behavior of teachers at Riverview High School is exaggerated for the purposes of comedy, and modern readers are likely to recognize the underlying personality traits even though the teachers' fixations may in part be grounded in the history of the 1950s. It might help readers who are curious about the hunt for communists and other details that may be absent from modern high schools to talk with those who attended schools in the 1950s. There may not have been communist witch hunts in schools, but there were documentary films warning young people about how to recognize communist cells and to whom these cells should be reported. This era of fear and suspicion saw the birth of the loyalty oath still required of teachers in many states,

and there was a fear that the educational system would be used to indoctrinate students into particular political beliefs—at Riverview such an effort is made by almost everyone, creating a hostile environment for students.

Sergeant Gunter may have been the nicest teacher for Nifkin, but he is just as surely trying to indoctrinate his students as Mrs. MacAllister is.

Literary Qualities

The narrator of The Education of Robert Nifkin is Nifkin himself; the novel is supposedly his essay response to an admissions form for St. Leon's College (probably intended as a parallel to Pinkwater's own alma mater Bard College). One of the (in his opinion, absurd) questions on the admissions application was: 64. Characterize, in essay form, your high-school experience. You may use additional sheets of paper as needed.

Since Pinkwater would have been applying for college himself in the 1950s, the novel may well be the imaginative response he would have liked to have given to a similar topic on his own admission application. Since author and protagonist both have Chicago backgrounds, it is easy to draw a parallel between Nifkin's admiration of the city's architecture, his love of art, and his absorption in American literature with Pinkwater's own likely experience as an artistic young man who would become a sculptor, illustrator, and a professional writer. Pinkwater also seems to invite the drawing of parallels between himself and Nifkin by naming Nifkin's mother Faye, a match for his own mother's name Fay, and by dating the essay "Robert Nifkin, Chicago, October 1958," which would be when Pinkwater himself would have been applying for admission to college.

Beyond these parallels one should take care to note that Nifkin is a created character, as are the other figures in the novel, which is fiction drawn from memories of life not autobiography. That Nifkin looks somewhat like Pinkwater, weighing in at 222 pounds, is not remarkable, as most of Pinkwater's main characters are heavy like himself. Pinkwater often uses aspects of his own youth as part of the background in his novels. In Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars (1979; see separate entry, Vol. 9), main character Leonard Neeble's father is in the rag business, as Pinkwater's own father was. Therefore, his use of childhood borrowings in The Education of Robert Nifkin, although heavy when compared to other Pinkwater works, is not unusual.

Themes and Characters

The theme of The Education of Robert Nifkin is stated explicitly in its title, with the novel itself telling how a teenage misfit manages to be educated in spite of the educational system inflicted upon him. Nifkin explains, in response to an essay topic on a college application form, how he made his way through high school, eventually graduating with good grades in spite of poor attendance and a lack of interest in most of his courses. The key to The Education of Robert Nifkin is that the education takes place outside of high school where Nifkin makes friends, observes hectic city life, earns money as he learns about people, and pursues academic interests, especially American literature, on his own in libraries.

He even acquires a suitably weird girlfriend who becomes a sometimes schoolmate at Wheaton School (everyone is a sometimes schoolmate at Wheaton).

When Nifkin comes to Riverview High School, he already has excellent credentials for being an outsider. Besides being fat and unathletic, his family life has made him feel as though he belongs on another planet.

He explains that his father left Poland at the outset of World War II, not just to escape the Nazis, but because his community could not tolerate him and bought him a ticket for America; they even escorted him to the train to make sure he really left on it. His father relates to Nifkin by telling him how stupid, lazy, and cowardly he is. Even though he verbally berates his son, he willingly spends the money it takes to send Nifkin to Wheaton School in hopes that the frequent truant will actually learn something. Nifkin's mother has adapted to living with a demanding husband, and her cooking has suffered because her husband requires bland foods. "I fear my mother's meatloaf more than I fear my father," Nifkin says, and "What my mother does to vegetables ought to be against the law." Furthermore, his parents are in love with tacky furniture and ugly decorations; their house is a monument to excessive money united with excessive bad taste. Home is an unpleasant place for Nifkin, and it has left him with doubts about his worthiness for anything. This means that he ends up trapped between home and school.

He is immediately an outsider at school. His gym teacher abuses him; his homeroom teacher rants about communists and suggests that his looks make him a likely candidate for communism; his biology teacher talks to her plants and wishes the students would go away; and another teacher tells her students that Jews have been conspiring for centuries to overthrow western civilization. It is his temporary good fortune to learn that students who join ROTC get out of taking gym class. ROTC is conducted by Sergeant Gunter: "You address me as Sergeant. I am not a member of the corrupt and parasitic officer class."

The school's one true communist runs the ROTC unit, and his room in the school basement is decorated with sayings by famous people. One sequence of sayings is: Duty is the sublimest word in our language.

—Robert E. Lee When a stupid man is doing something he is ashamed of, he always declares that it is his duty.

—George Bernard Shaw Duty is what one expects of others.

—Oscar Wilde Robert E. Lee was a weenie.

—Alphonso Gunter Sergeant Gunter's appeal to Nifkin lies neither in his attempts at indoctrination nor in his teaching; he notes that "Sergeant Gunter was impressive as he conducted the lecture while asleep himself." Sergeant Gunter's appeal is that crazy or not, he treats his students well. When he is arrested for being a communist, turned in by one of his ROTC students, Riverview High School looks like it could become an unredeemed nightmare for Nifkin.

If Pinkwater was Samuel Butler and if The Education of Robert Nifkin was The Way of All Flesh (1903)-which The Education of Robert Nifkin somewhat resembles in structure and its use of autobiographical material—Nifkin would be doomed to a demeaning life of fulfilling duties to his family and to his school, with his creativity stifled and all hope for happiness suppressed. He might even become as insane as his teachers, but with Pinkwater at work Nifkin has choices. They begin with his chance meeting with Linda Pudovkin at Mel's, home of greasy Melburgers. He admires her ability to eat a triple Melburger, something he will not even attempt: "Only polar bears and Arctic wolves can digest them."

She introduces him to her boyfriend Kenny Papescu, and a whole new world opens up for Nifkin—one filled with life and useful activity.

Papescu, supposedly a high school student himself, spends most days away from school. He delivers furniture now and then, usually forgeries of antiques, and he takes Nifkin with him. Nifkin quickly learns that moving furniture pays. He also discovers that no one really misses him at school. The teachers either do not notice that he is usually absent, or they are happy to be rid of him. Nifkin, when not with Papescu, is therefore able to have time to pursue his interests. He reads American literature, he visits art galleries, he stares at the city's architecture, or he visits a coffee house where various unusual people mingle. He falls in love with Chicago, visiting the Loop and calling it an amusement park ride in which he glides along on his feet. The secret is to keep moving as thousands of people rush to wherever they are going: "After a while, all the empty space, between and inside the buildings, and all the solid space—the buildings themselves, cars, buses, peoplewould start to feel like it was all moving, dancing. It was like music."

The world Papescu introduces Nifkin to is populated by wild and improbable characters, eventually including Sergeant Gunter, who lost his teaching position, was jailed, has been let out of jail, and now makes speeches at the coffee shop. Linda Pudovkin is tough and quick with her fists, and she explains that Papescu and she are saving themselves sexually: "When we need to overcome desire, we talk on the phone while wearing boxer shorts on our heads—which does the trick.

You might keep it in mind," she says.

As blunt about her eccentricities as she is about his, Nifkin can be blunt with her, confiding that he sometimes thinks he is in a black-and-white movie. Papescu is big-nosed, with thick glasses, and walks like a gorilla. He is also a good source for work that pays, even if it is somewhat shady work, and he is a good resource for learning how to cope with a school system that is cruel and debilitating. He also introduces Nifkin to Pamela, who calls herself Nastasia. She wears white makeup on her face in the manner of Chicago beatniks of the time (the Chicago beatniks meet some real New York beatniks and are frightened by them), dresses in black, and is perpetually sad. She also takes to pulling Nifkin into closets at Wheaton and kissing him. About Nifkin, she says, "I have loved him from the first moment I saw him." Nifkin remarks, "This made my head swim." Thus, once Nifkin makes one true friend, he makes another, and each new friend leads him on to other new friends so that he eventually becomes part of a community of people who care about each other.

Belonging to a group of people who like one another pays immediate dividends. When Riverview discovers that Nifkin has been truant for months, causing his father to receive a threatening notice that Nifkin must attend school, a new friend is now available to help him escape this pending predicament. It is Papescu to the rescue with his secret to attending school without attending school: the Wheaton School. The teachers at Wheaton are generally as nuts as those at Riverview, but they are nonetheless different from the usual. This, for instance, is Wally Gershkowitz: Wally Gershkowitz was easily the ugliest person I had ever seen. In his late twenties, he was swarthy, unshaven, and short, with a shock of coarse black hair, pale brown eyes, a pig's snout, and a sneering expression. He held a Lucky Strike cigarette between the yellowed second and third fingers of his left hand. I liked him immediately.

Part of what makes Gershkowitz special is that he, like Nifkin, is far from handsome, but more important is that for all his cynical ways, he cares about his students. When Nifkin first comes upon him, he is meeting with students in his rooms at night because that is when they want to see him. He is cavalier about grades and makes cynical remarks about giving away As, but his actions show him to be someone who actually cares about young people. He mixes with his students, goes where they go, eats where they eat, and proves to be an excellent guide for Nifkin regarding the dos and don'ts of Wheaton.

The Education of Robert Nifkin is populated with several such vividly fleshed-out and intense characters, all so real they could be found avoiding school someplace today. It is through these extraordinary characters that Nifkin is educated, and he learns a great deal about such matters as being a true friend, accepting people as they are, open mindedness, the spiritual and intellectual riches to be had in the city, and how to educate himself. He learns to definitively take charge of his own education and not passively wait for it to be delivered. What high school offers pales in comparison to what he achieves.

Topics for Discussion

1. Who turned Sergeant Gunter in?

Why would he do so?

2. If you had to choose between Riverview and Wheaton, which school would you prefer to attend? What would make it preferable?

3. What aspects of Chicago does Nifkin like best? How well does he explain why he likes them?

4. Why doesn't anyone care that the furniture Nifkin helps deliver are fakes? Even the purchaser of the obviously fraudulent table does not seem concerned about its bogus authentication.

5. The Education of Robert Nifkin is full of sharp one-liners, for instance: "I fear my mother's meatloaf more than I fear my father."

"When we need to overcome desire, we talk on the phone while wearing boxer shorts on our heads . . ."

"Presumably, somewhere in the building, classes were going on.

Nobody seemed to give a damn. It was lovely."

What are your favorites? What do they contribute to the novel?

6. Does The Education of Robert Nifkin reflect any of your own attitudes toward school? Has it influenced any of you attitudes?

7. What would happen to America if every student's high school education were like Nifkin's? Would people be better off or worse off than they are now?

8. What is the future for Nifkin and Nastasia?

9. How educated is Nifkin by the end of The Education of Robert Nifkin?

10. Will college be a good experience for Nifkin?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. There have been experiments with undisciplined learning environments like that of Wheaton School. What are they? Have any been successes? How would you define a school's success?

2. What should a high school provide its students? What would be your ideal high school? What would it do?

How would students experience it?

3. Nifkin attends high school in the mid-to-late 1950s. What was the fuss about communism in America's schools in those days? What sort of threat was there?

4. What was a beatnik? Were beatniks like the ones described in The Education of Robert Nifkin?

5. What are the libraries, public and university, of Chicago? What would they offer Nifkin?

6. Compare The Way of All Flesh by Samuel Butler to The Education of Robert Nifkin. What do they have in common? How do they differ? What do the differences tell us about what Pinkwater wants to do in The Education of Robert Nifkin?

7. The Education of Robert Nifkin is populated with eccentric characters.

Some are two dimensional, like most of the teachers at Riverview High School. Nifkin's parents seem to rise only a little out of two dimensions.

Which characters in the novel are the most developed, and which are the least developed? Why would Pinkwater fully develop the particular characters he does?

8. How common are forged and imitation antiques? What is the market for them?

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Related Titles

The Education of Robert Nifkin shares a common setting with Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars and The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death, even though the names of the schools and the cities may differ. Even the insane biology teacher makes an appearance in The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death. The background for each novel includes an unpleasant school where the main characters are outcasts and where teachers are indifferent or even hostile toward their students. The main characters of Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars and The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death have more fabulous adventures than does Nifkin, but Nifkin's escape into a better life is paralleled in The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death, where the boys and their friends find a world of mystery and adventure beneath the city. These books share with Pinkwater's other work for young people characters who become energetic agents in creating new personalities and destinies for themselves; they may be passive to begin with, but what they make of their experiences turn them into people responsible for their own lives.

One of the keys to their success is learning outside the classroom. In The Education of Robert Nifkin, the protagonist uses libraries as learning centers.

In Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars, Leonard Neeble uses libraries as resources for expanding his knowledge so that he can take charge of his life in the classroom, presenting to his teacher and the other students a depth of understanding that goes beyond textbooks. In nearly all of Pinkwater's novels, there is articulated the fierce conviction that no matter how unattractive, uncoordinated, and socially inept one is, one can create a life rich in friends and excitement.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes 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

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