

Facing Up Short Guide

Facing Up by Robin F. Brancato

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Overview

Facing Up tells the story of Dave Jacoby, a somewhat conservative teenager. Spanning the last few weeks of Dave's junior year in high school and the following summer, the story focuses on the relationship between Dave and his best friend, Jep. Considering his own overprotective parents, Dave envies Jep's independence and worldliness. Jep's parents are divorced and he lives in an apartment with his mother.

Dave also envies Jep's girlfriend, Susan, a girl Dave has loved since seventh grade.

In the first part of the story, Susan tells Dave that she has outgrown Jep and is planning to break up with him.

When Susan informs Dave that she now loves him, Dave is torn between his loyalty to Jep and his feelings for Susan. After witnessing Susan's shallowness, Dave decides that his friendship with Jep is too valuable to jeopardize. Before he can explain his actions to Jep, however, an accident on a rainslick road kills Jep and leaves Dave feeling responsible for Jep's death.

The latter part of the book describes Dave's attempts to cope with Jep's death. Finding it difficult to talk about his feelings with anyone, Dave shuts himself off from his friends and family.

His only solace comes from his summer job, and he dreads the start of school in the fall. To appease his worried parents, Dave agrees to play football. Instead, however, he decides to go on a camping trip that he and Jep had planned the previous spring. Managing to dupe his parents into believing he will be attending football camp while they are on vacation, he takes off through the countryside on Jep's moped. Alone on the Long Island coast, Dave finally comes to terms with his loss. It takes a brush with drowning, however, to make him realize that he really wants to live.

About the Author

Robin Fidler Brancato was born on March 19, 1936, in Reading, Pennsylvania to W. Robert and Margretta (Neuroth) Fidler. After receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in Education at the University of Pennsylvania in 1958, she worked as a copy editor for John Wiley & Sons in New York City until 1961. She married John J. Brancato on December 17, 1960; they have two sons.

From 1967 to 1979, Brancato taught English, journalism, and creative writing at Hackensack High School in Hackensack, New Jersey. She published her first novel, *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*, in 1975; a year later, she received a Master of Arts degree from City College of New York.

A popular writer of contemporary fiction for young adults, Brancato received the American Library Association Best Book award three times: in 1977 for *Winning*, in 1980 for *Come Alive at 505*, and in 1982 for *Sweet Bells Jangled Out of Tune*.

As a young adult, Robin Brancato preferred realism in the fiction she read. That preference is reflected in her writing. Her novels, *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree* (1975), *Something Left to Lose* (1976), and *Winning* (1977), are drawn from her experiences as a teacher.

Setting

The setting of *Facing Up* is not an integral part of the story. While it is set in modern-day Long Island, just about any city would have worked as well.

Revolving around the high school and the homes of the teen-age characters, much of the action in *Facing Up* takes place in and around cars. The tragedy on which the novel centers occurs on a darkened highway as a result of an inexperienced driver combined with hazardous driving conditions.

The last chapters of the novel take place in the countryside as Dave travels to Montauk Point. At a little-used beach at the end of Long Island, Dave finally comes to terms with the changes in his life. There is a suggestion that the change of scenery is necessary for Dave to have a chance to understand the implications of Jep's death and his own role in it. It is also possible to argue that Brancato intends her readers to see the contrast between the fastpaced life in suburbia, with its attendant materialistic values, and the more wholesome, basic lifestyle that characterizes the countryside and seashore.

Social Sensitivity

Brancato deals sensitively with the subject of teen-age friendship, betrayal, and loss in *Facing Up*. While touching on the issue of teen-age drinking, Brancato avoids preaching. The middle-income youngsters in her novel are already drinking as part of their socializing—without parental approval. This is clearly wrong, but by showing the consequences of drinking, the author invites the reader to reach his or her own conclusions. The realistic treatment of the subject, as well as Brancato's graphic description of Jep's death and its effect on Dave, may require special attention by teachers and other adults working with younger readers.



Literary Qualities

A contemporary novel of teen-age high school life, *Facing Up* deals with friendship and relationships in a story with enough action and dialogue to keep young adults entertained. Dave, a likeable and interesting protagonist, is faced with problems that will be familiar to many of today's teen-agers.

Through his story Brancato explores the dilemma many teen-agers face in choosing between same-sex friends and those of the opposite sex. *Facing Up* also discusses frankly the differences between real friendship and sham relationships manipulated by one partner for personal satisfaction.

A central issue that concerns all the characters is the effect of death on their lives. An early conversation between Dave and Jep foreshadows Jep's death, and the opinion Jep expresses about death might soften some reader's reactions to the tragedy. Near the end of the novel, Dave undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth, nearly drowning in the ocean but living to begin his life anew with friends such as Nan and his longtime male companion Willoughby, who organizes a rescue mission after learning from Nan where Dave may have run to. The novel is an affirmation of life in the face of both feigned and real tragedy, and can serve as an object lesson for teen-agers who are often convinced that there is nothing to live for when close relationships end.



Themes and Characters

Most of the characters in *Facing Up* are familiar character types. The protagonist, Dave Jacoby, is a conservative young man with a stable family life and parents he considers overprotective. A typical high school junior, Dave's main concerns as the story begins are girls, cars, and parties. A sympathetic hero, Dave is the only character in the story to show any real growth. Like most teen-agers, he is quick to lay blame, either on others or himself, when bad things happen. His major discovery is that, while one must take responsibility for one's actions, being an adult means learning to accept failure and go on living, and to live with the possibility that some events are accidents for which no one can be blamed.

Dave's friend Jep is a worldly and adventurous charmer. His parents are divorced, and he lives with his mother, who is frequently absent from their apartment. Dave envies Jep's freedom and independence, and though never stated, it is apparent that Jep envies Dave's more "normal" lifestyle.

Susan Scherra and Nan Tobin, the two main female characters, are disappointing in their lack of development.

Susan is a sensation seeker who shows little true emotion. She seems intent on fulfilling her selfish desires without regard to others' feelings. Nan is a more sympathetic character; nevertheless, Brancato never fully explores the potential complexities she presents as the daughter of divorced parents whose own lifestyles force her to move across country to be with either of them.

While none of the adults in the story are realistically portrayed, and Dave's parents are little more than cardboard characters, this might not be a problem for the young adult reader who often has little interest in the point of view of adults in circumstances such as those described in the novel. Brancato deftly sketches the Jacobys as concerned parents who want to help their children grow to maturity by setting realistic boundaries for them.



Topics for Discussion

1. Dave appears to envy Jep, and yet they are best friends. Why is Dave able to maintain this friendship in the face of the negative emotion?
2. Dave views the more worldly Jep as independent and mature. Discuss the signs of maturity shown by Jep and Dave. Who do you believe is more mature? Explain your choice.
3. Nan Tobin and Susan Scherra are quite different. Which would be a better friend and why?
4. Dave believes his parents are overprotective. Compare Dave's parents with Jep's. Which would you choose?

Why?

5. When Dave buys a car, it is a symbolic act. Discuss what owning a car means for a young adult.
6. Dave feels that he is responsible for Jep's death. Discuss ways in which he is or is not responsible.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Robin Brancato used experiences from her life in creating the situations in her fiction. Write a short story which deals with an experience or problem in your life.
2. Teen-age drinking is a problem in contemporary society, and many schools have clubs or organizations to help students overcome alcohol dependence. Prepare a report about your school's or community's response to teen-age drinking.
3. Compare and contrast two or three characters in *Facing Up*. Which characters do you consider positive influences on Dave, and which characters are negative influences?
4. Accepting responsibility is part of growing up. Dave blames himself for what happened to Jep. What is the difference between accepting responsibility for one's actions and blaming oneself?
5. Authors often have a difficult time choosing a title for their books. Explain the meaning of the title, *Facing Up* and tell why it is or is not a good choice for this book.

For Further Reference

Allen, Constance. Review. In *School Library Journal*, April 1984: 122. A short negative review.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol 23. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. Contains a brief sketch of the author's life and works.

Flowers, Ann. Review. In *Horn Book*, 60 April 1984: 199. While finding it "less observant of the social milieu" than *The Outsiders*, Flowers, nevertheless considers *Facing Up* filled with "vitality and interest."

Marowski, Daniel, ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol 35. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. Contains excerpts from reviews of Brancato's novels.

Yablonsky, Victoria. Review. In *Voice of Youth Advocates*, October 1984: 195.

While noting "the use of some negative female stereotypes," this reviewer suggests that *Facing Up* be considered by those seeking novels dealing with friendships between adolescent males.

Related Titles

Robin Brancato has written many books for young adults. Among them *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*, 1975; *Something Left to Lose*, 1976; *Winning*, 1977; *Blinded by the Light*, 1978; *Come Alive at 505*, 1980; *Sweet Bells Jangled Out of Tune*, 1980; *Facing Up*, 1984. In addition, *Blinded by the Light* was made into a television movie and shown on CBS in 1980.



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