

Family Resemblances Short Guide

Family Resemblances by Lowry Pei

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Overview

In *Family Resemblances*, Pei writes about different aspects of honesty and different types of relationships in a realistic and believable fashion. His characters speak and act in ways familiar to his readers, conflicted about what secrets are safe to tell, what thoughts to keep hidden, and what course of action seems right. Augusta and Karen both carefully select the information they share with others.

Augusta tells Karen only part of the truth about her relationship with Jim but the entire story of her time with Allan. Karen hides the sexual aspect of her relationship with Roger from her parents but manages to let Augusta know about her feelings for George through her actions and behavior. Each allows others to know a controlled truth.

The shifting relationships among the characters also play a large role in the story. Pei explores the subtleties that exist in parent/child, adult, and friend/lover relationships, and how the lines between these can blur at times. From the perspective of age and experience, the relationship between Augusta and Karen should be classified as a parent/child one—at times Karen does feel as if Augusta treats her like a child—but more often tends to fall into the adult relationship category. Augusta obviously trusts Karen enough to tell her things no one else knows. Augusta's relationships with Jerry and Allan fluctuate as well. As different as these men are, at one time each was her lover, each her friend, and each wanted more from her than she felt ready to give, but both remain a part of her life. Through these characters, Pei shows the ambiguity inherent in most relationships.

About the Author

Lowry Pei has written five novels and half a dozen short stories. His short stories have appeared in the *Ohio Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Stories*, the now-defunct *Writer's Barbecue*, *Imagine*, *The Best American Short Stories of 1984*, and *Edges*, a science fiction anthology edited by Ursula K. LeGuin and Virginia Kidd. Of his novels, he is currently seeking a publisher for two of them, *The Persistence of Desire* and a novel he completed while on a recent sabbatical in which all the characters are seventeen.

While Pei writes about young adults and the issues that concern them, he resists categorizing *Family Resemblances*, or any other author's work, as a "young adult" novel, finding this label an "artificial. . . commercial making of product," potentially harmful to the work and the reader. He feels that an intelligent, well-written book will attract an audience whatever its subject matter. In talks at schools, he finds teen-agers who read books classified as "adult" works, as well as those labeled "young adult." In fact, he fears his latest work will not find a publisher easily because it is too long to be marketed as young adult fiction and the age of the protagonists may deter adult fiction editors from taking it under consideration for publication.

Pei has been writing for the last twenty years and finds that his best ideas for novels and stories come from free writing. The first sentence for *Family Resemblances*, he says, came to him while he was driving. He attempted to plan out his latest novel and found the process extremely frustrating. By sitting and free writing, the idea and characters emerged, and he was able to begin work. Pei teaches writing at Simmons College, where he has been since 1985. He lives in the Boston area and is a fan of the St. Louis Cardinals, who appear in many of his stories.

Setting

The story takes place in the summer sometime in the late twentieth century, probably in the 1980s, although no specific year is mentioned. Karen, a fifteen-year-old girl from the suburbs of Chicago, has been sent to New Franklin, Illinois, ostensibly to visit her Aunt Augusta but in actuality to curtail her extravagant moping over "a lost boyfriend." While at Augusta's house, Karen helps repair the old house where her aunt lives and listens to Augusta's stories. She observes Augusta's relationship with Jerry Reese, a highschool sweetheart turned adult friend, begins a relationship herself with a boy named George, who looks for something to interest him in New Franklin as well as escape from his grandparents' house, and learns about herself and her family.

Social Sensitivity

Pei touches on two specific subjects that seem especially pertinent in today's society, love affairs and anti-Semitism. The love affairs about which Pei writes include both premarital and extra-marital, both of which he treats with a good deal of sensitivity. Premarital love affairs are looked upon with more tolerance; Augusta's early relationships with Jerry and Allan appear much more simple than the ones in her present, and Pei shows Karen's relationship with George in a tender manner. His characters do not condemn premarital sex but accept it as a fact of life. Augusta even tells Karen, "If you do take him to your room some night, don't stop because of me," but she also makes the point that Karen should not make love with George unless she feels ready. Through Karen, the point is made that not all teen-agers are ready.

When Augusta mentions this, Karen feels as though something unclean has been spoken. While she loves George and enjoys the physical aspect of their relationship, she is not emotionally ready for more.

Pei portrays extra-marital relationships in a complex manner. While Augusta feels the immorality of what she does, she continues to see Jim, telling Karen that one cannot choose who to love, and this view is countered by Karen's moral revulsion—"To me adultery seemed like VD . . . a terrible confession that surely nobody connected to me would ever have to make"—and Allan's view that people need to be happy, even if it means making wrong decisions. Unlike the views on premarital sex, no overt judgment is given, leaving it to the reader to decide the morality of Augusta's actions.

While anti-Semitism does not play a prominent role in the novel, it is present, and the bigoted sentiments expressed by some of the characters are similar to ones found in small towns and large cities across the world. The two most blatant examples of anti-Semitism come from the two people who were once closest to Augusta, Karen's mother Cheryl and Jerry. "Cheryl . . .

was the one who put the hex on me and Allan, really," Augusta tells Karen.

"'I've got nothing against the Jews,' she kept saying, 'but you're asking for a world of trouble.'" Cheryl's actions speak louder than her words, however.

By cooking a ham for Thanksgiving dinner, Cheryl shows how little regard she actually has for Jews, for their culture and their beliefs. Kind, understanding Jerry also possesses a spark of anti-Semitism. Augusta tells Karen that to Jerry "the word 'Jew' was nothing but an insult."



Literary Qualities

A strong sense of place and narrative style help intertwine the elements of plot. The use of a small town as setting is crucial to the background tension in the story. In a city or even a larger town, no one would care if Augusta's air conditioning worked or if she carried on affairs with married men, but in New Franklin keeping both your secrets and your reputation become more important, and even Karen falls under the spell of secrecy. When she and George kiss on the porch, she becomes paranoid that they are being watched, and when she takes George up to her room, she insists he not kiss her in front of the window. In some sense the atmosphere around New Franklin stifles; everyone knows everyone else and discusses the neighbors.

George tells Karen while they are at the pool, "all they ever talk about is each other. You wouldn't believe the stuff I overhear." Karen notices the differences between Augusta, and to a small measure herself, from the other women in town. The teen-agers seem more quick to brand Karen a snob because she is unfamiliar with their social mores. To the women, however, Augusta belongs to another world; No woman of her age, even if she had ... gorgeous hair, would ever wear it down, or be seen in town in blue jeans and mannish shirts ...

what was really wrong was the look in her eye, lonely and defiant.

New Franklin's small town setting reinforces the isolation of the main characters, the feeling that they do not entirely belong.

Pei heightens this sense of being an outsider by having Karen narrate the story. As an adolescent, Karen struggles with the strangeness of the changing relationships around her, and, as an outsider, she does not completely understand the social structure present in New Franklin. The isolation and pain she feels are as much a part of the novel as Augusta's stories about Jerry and Allan. By using a first-person narration, Pei draws the reader into the story because much of the story's power comes from Karen's impressions of the people and events around her.

With an omniscient narrator, the story would have lost some of its edge because the thoughts of all the characters would be presented. Similarly a thirdperson narration, where the perspective belongs to Karen or another character but refers to the narrator as he or she, would lose some of its immediacy.

Given the story's topic and setting, Pei's choice of Karen as narrator adds both depth and subtlety to the work.



Themes and Characters

As *Family Resemblances* takes place in a small town, it does not contain a large cast of characters. An interesting aspect of the story is that four of the five main characters do not belong to the town, either by birth or by their ideas. Karen and George are in New Franklin just for the summer, visiting family members. Allan lives in New York, and while not physically present in the story, maintains a presence by being a large part of Augusta's life.

Augusta owns a home in New Franklin but chooses not to subscribe to many of the town's tenets, preferring to live her own somewhat unconventional life.

Jerry is the only character who truly belongs to the setting, and, while Augusta's independence attracts him, he shares the town's beliefs and prejudices. Others in the story act merely as a backdrop to the main characters. Karen's parents appear sporadically, giving the reader an idea of her background and the types of relationships to which she is accustomed. The townspeople in New Franklin perform a similar function for Augusta; by seeing the society around her, it becomes more possible to see the differences in her attitudes.

The reader knows Karen the best by the end of the novel. As the narrator of the story, her impressions color the reader's view of the action and the other characters. In her own thoughts and actions, Karen is very much an adolescent hovering on the edge of adulthood. Her excessive moping over Roger combined with her knowledge that she is overindulging show her intelligence, and her independence exhibits itself in the amount of time she spends by herself. Her thoughts show her to be torn between wanting the trust and intimacy that comes with adult relationships but not wishing to have the responsibilities and pain that can accompany them. She is adult enough to recognize the beginnings of sexual desire, but she finds the concept of having sex unthinkable. When Augusta talks to her about the need to protect herself if she and George have sex, she initially takes refuge in childlike behavior: "I knew I could yell at Augusta, storm into my room and slam the door . . . But I could also decide not to, I could pay attention instead."

Her realization that she does need to listen and does need to face realities such as the need to be sexually responsible and that her parents' marriage is troubled, pushes her over the cusp of adolescence into the adult world of decisions and responsibility.

Little is shown about George. Karen does not encounter him at the town pool until more than half-way through the novel, because until that point she had not emotionally left her childhood.

Once she forgives the human frailty present in Augusta's affair with Jim, she starts growing towards adulthood and is ready to begin a relationship different from the one with Roger.



George has already reached this point, and, as he says to Karen at the pool, "I've been here all summer waiting for something to happen," and Karen is that something. George is older than Karen in maturity for reasons other than age. The loss of his father and the realization that he does not fit in with his family, that his mother and grandparents neither understand him nor like him very much, force him to seek understanding elsewhere. He respects Augusta for her openness and her seeming ability to live outside of an imposed structure for conduct. In some respects, it appears that he falls in love with Karen in part for the Augusta-like qualities she exhibits. George seeks escape from his family and finds that escape with Karen.

If little is shown about George, even less is shown about Allan. Most of what the reader learns about him is derived from Augusta's stories and the rest from a single letter. From what is revealed about him, Allan seems to be a man of strongly held convictions and is one of the few people who can stand up to Augusta, at one point writing that she is "probably mad now, because no one ever dares to tell you you're afraid" when discussing the reasons why she left him in New York.

In the novel, discussions about and letters from Allan become a forum to put Augusta's actions into perspective, forcing her to consider the choices she made and options in front of her. Allan also serves as a counterpoint to the attitudes of New Franklin. With regard to her affair with Jim, he simply tells her the choices she has, to either "love him if he's what you want, and if there's trouble, face it. Or stop now, give him up." Where Jerry becomes upset and hollers, Allan chooses to state the facts and not to judge.

Although she plays a large part in the story, Augusta is very hard to decipher as a character. On one hand, she lives alone in a small town, she wears blue jeans everywhere when others dress to shop, and she carries on an affair with a married man. On the other hand, she rolls up the windows on her Buick so that the townspeople do not realize her air conditioning no longer works and she cannot afford to get it fixed, and she walks out on a man she loves for no apparent reason. She feels very strongly about things she should have done—sleeping with Allan after the failed Thanksgiving dinner, for instance—but appears indecisive about things occurring in her life in the present. She clearly enjoys getting her own way in things but is too proud to ask for help to achieve her goals. By her own admittance she is hard to get along with, yet three very different men love her and want to be with her.

Her relationship with Karen is just as complex; she alternately treats Karen as a child and as an equal. Overall, Augusta is an enigma.

Jerry is more easily understood than Augusta in many respects. Most of the time he appears to be an easy-going, small-town gentleman who alternately loves Augusta dearly and feels infuriated by her actions. His temper and prejudices are not shown directly, but rather through what Augusta says about him. When he finds out about her affair, he comes to warn her that others also know and ends up storming out of the house. Although he feels angry with her, he comes by again after the summerhouse falls down, and on Karen's advice, does not wait for permission to help clear the debris. Jerry wants very much to please Augusta and cannot seem to realize that his desire to



do things for her is most of what keeps her from loving him. While Jerry views a relationship as two people who assist one another, Augusta sees the favors that Jerry does for her as a hindrance.

Family Resemblances carries quiet themes. Rather than explore cosmic ideas of good versus evil or redemption, Pei concentrates on the more human elements of forgiveness and the need to accept responsibility. Both Karen and Augusta gradually learn these over the course of the story. Initially, Augusta chooses not to accept responsibility for her actions. Her affair with Jim started with no outward prodding on her part. She tells Karen, "I . . .

stood right in front of him . . . looked him in the eye and held still . . . he got the message right away." Augusta intends to use Karen's visit as a reason to stop seeing Jim. She wants Karen to take the burden of responsibility away from her. When Karen unknowingly does stop Jim by turning the Buick's headlights on him at night, Augusta resents the action. Karen learns to accept responsibility at the end of the novel when she chooses to leave New Franklin to try to help her parents recover their marriage.

Forgiveness is harder to pin down in the novel. At one point or another each character must forgive the actions of another. Jerry must try to understand why Augusta will not marry him and George to see why Karen has to leave.

Augusta must come to terms with her sister's behavior toward Allan at the "Thanksgiving that wasn't," and Karen has to forgive Augusta for deceiving her. Pei does not offer any explanations in the novel for how these things occur, he simply presents them as a part of life.



Topics for Discussion

1. In talking with Karen, Augusta implies that her relationship with Jim has been over for some time, but, as Karen discovers, this is untrue. Why did Augusta lie to Karen? Was it right?

2. Reputation seems to matter a great deal to the residents of New Franklin, including Augusta although she denies it. She tells Karen that while there "is no escape" from the town, "home is home." What does she mean by this?

Why did she move into her parents' home?

3. Should Karen have made love to George? Why or why not? What stopped her?

4. Despite the way she treats him, Jerry still loves Augusta. Why? Should she marry him?

5. Allan writes to Augusta that "a second chance is more than anyone has the right to expect," and yet Augusta left Allan when that chance appeared.

Why?

6. Does Augusta place too much of a burden on Karen by telling Karen her stories?

7. Karen is torn between wanting to stay with Augusta and George and feeling the need to return to her parents. Why does she choose to go? Is this the right choice?

8. Why does Augusta drive through town with the windows on the Buick rolled up?

9. At one point, Karen comments that Augusta must enjoy baseball because it is not as complicated as real life. Is there truth to this observation?

10. Why does Augusta insist on making Karen drive to the train station when she wants to leave the day after Jim appears at the house?

11. What are the resemblances between Augusta and Cheryl? Between Karen and Augusta?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Karen spends a great deal of time reading Dorothy L. Sayers's "Lord Peter" mysteries. In several of these novels, an independent female character named Harriet Vane appears as one of the main characters. Read the novel *Strong Poison* and compare Harriet and Augusta. What are their similarities?

Their differences?

2. When Augusta invites Allan home for Thanksgiving, Cheryl, Karen's mother, bakes a ham for dinner, and Augusta is appalled by her sister's blatant disregard for Allan's religion.

Many Jews follow strict dietary laws, of which one rule is not to eat pork.

Examine the Jewish dietary code. What rules govern if a food is kosher? From a modern point of view, are these laws still necessary?

4. Pei tells the story through the eyes of Karen, an adolescent. How would the story change if Augusta told the story? Choose a pivotal scene in the novel and rewrite it first from Augusta's point of view and then from one other character's point of view.

Does the scene still work? Why or why not?

5. Augusta's friends tell her repeatedly that Allan "couldn't marry a woman who wasn't Jewish," but interfaith marriages are becoming more common as society opens up. What sort of challenges face these couples? Is society really any more accepting of their choices than it was in past eras?

6. When Karen leaves New Franklin, many things are still in a state of flux: Augusta has refused Jerry's latest marriage proposal, Karen's parents have forgotten "why they got married to each other," and Karen must leave George just as she realizes she loves him. Write a letter updating these situations either from Karen to Augusta, Augusta to Karen, or Karen to George, dated December 1.

For Further Reference

Smith, Lee. Review. "Her Desire Won't Let Go." *New York Times Book Review* (April 26, 1986): 9-11. Smith gives Pei's work a good review, calling it "good fiction with plenty of ambiguity," and providing a brief plot synopsis.

Steinberg, Sybil. Review. *Publishers Weekly* 229 (February 21, 1986): 154.

Unfavorable review.

Related Titles

Cold Sassy Tree (1984), by Olive Ann Burns, and To Kill a Mockingbird (1961), by Harper Lee, while set in different eras, are both novels that portray life in small towns as seen through the eyes of teenagers.

In Lowry Pei's Family Resemblances (1986), Karen, a teenager who spends the summer with her aunt and falls in love, can be compared to Billy in The Arizona Kid.



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