

First a Dream Short Guide

First a Dream by Maureen Daly

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Contents

First a Dream Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	7
Literary Qualities.....	8
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles.....	15
Copyright Information.....	16



Overview

First a Dream can be read independently, but it is best understood as an extension of the story of Retta Caldwell and Dallas Dobson begun in Acts of Love. In the earlier novel, Retta and Dallas meet at Havendale High in Zenith, Pennsylvania, and experience an intense attraction for each other in spite of their opposite cultural and social backgrounds. Unfortunately for their blossoming romance, Retta's family moves across country to Thirty-nine Palms, California, in late spring, just as the school year ends. In order to be near Retta, Dallas secures employment for the summer at a ranch nearby. First a Dream opens with the arrival of Dallas at the Palms Springs airport.

Retta anticipates her romance with Dallas will continue at the same pace as in Zenith, with the two savoring time together as they explore their relationship and plumb the depths of their feelings for each other. She discovers, however, that the tempo has increased, and Dallas wants a larger, more permanent commitment from her than she is prepared to make. Much of the summer is spent in unhappiness as the two grope for common ground, with Retta acutely aware they are on different timetables.

In spite of the emotional turmoil that accents their days, both Retta and Dallas find satisfaction in the employment each has secured. Retta is commissioned by her father to write articles for the newspaper he publishes, and she finds she has talent and a growing competence. Dallas proves a hardworking, dependable employee for the Bradleys at Rancho Arabian. He endears himself to them by assisting in the birth of a colt when a valuable mare foals unexpectedly.

The events of the summer help both Dallas and Retta to mature, and, as choices are made, each focuses more clearly on the person he or she is and on the goals for his or her life. Dallas gains sufficient self-respect to aspire to attending college to become a veterinarian. He determines that with or without Retta, it is time to get on with his life. He believes he is prepared to overcome whatever obstacles might develop. Retta also looks forward to completing high school and beginning college. She agrees to accept the legacy left her by Aunt Blue, a former housekeeper, although it means she must leave her family and return to Zenith for the following two years. As Retta contemplates the increased nearness to Dallas the move will bring, she realizes she and Dallas are no longer on different timetables. Whatever the future holds, she sees Dallas as a continuing part of her life.

About the Author

Maureen Daly electrified the publishing world with the publication of her young adult novel *Seventeenth Summer* in 1942. She was not yet twenty years old. The novel became a best-seller and has since sold over 1.5 million hardcover copies, as well as millions of the paperback editions. *Seventeenth Summer*, however, was not Daly's first writing success. When she was fifteen, she wrote a story entitled "Fifteen" which won third prize in Scholastic magazine's short story contest. The following year, she won first prize with her story "Sixteen." "Sixteen" was selected for inclusion in the 1938 O. Henry Memorial Award volume and was later reprinted in *Redbook* magazine. It has since been published in more than three hundred anthologies and in twelve languages. The text of "Sixteen" appears in *Acts of Love* under the guise of papers which Retta Caldwell discovers in a trunk in the attic of her home.

Daly was born in 1921 in Castlecaufield, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland.

Her father brought the family to America when three of his daughters were under three years of age. They settled in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, on the banks of Lake Winnebago, where she grew up and graduated from high school. She chose to pursue a career in journalism despite her early success in fiction. She became a reporter-columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* and later an associate editor of *Ladies Home Journal*. She met her husband William McGivern in Chicago at an autograph party for *Seventeenth Summer*, and they were married in 1948. McGivern, also a writer, and Daly moved to Europe to freelance, where the family remained until their two children, Megan and Patrick, were teen-agers. They returned to the United States to live, first in Pennsylvania and later in California.

A series of personal events inspired Daly to write again for the young adult audience. Daly's husband died of cancer in November 1983. Soon after, her daughter also developed cancer and died thirteen months after her father.

Acts of Love became a book of catharsis as Daly wrote of Megan and McGivern in the roles of Retta Caldwell and her father. Daly chose to write of a time when her family was living in Pennsylvania and a highway was built, bisecting their land and forcing the family to resettle in California. She also wrote of young Megan's first experience at falling in love. While the book is about actual people, it is a book of fiction.

Daly states she plans to write Megan's "real" story in a work entitled *Megan: A Different Love Story* at a time when the writing is less painful. In 1990 Daly published *First a Dream*, which continues the love story of Retta Caldwell and Dallas Dobson after the Caldwells move to Thirty-nine Palms, California.

Daly tends to write microscopically of the things she knows. Her hometown of Fond du Lac is the setting of *Seventeenth Summer*, and each of her young adult novels has its inception in autobiographical experiences. Daly's forte is the power to capture feelings and sensations so vividly that there is an immediate emotional bonding with her

readers. As Judy Blume suggests on the dust jacket of *Acts of Love*, one remembers long after the reading of *Seventeenth Summer* the longing, yearning emotions of Angie Morrow. This is attested by the fact that the perennially popular book, now fifty years old, has never gone out of print. *Acts of Love* and *First a Dream* represent a long awaited reappearance of a writer who helped launch the young adult novel as a legitimate genre.

Setting

The story takes place in and around Thirty-nine Palms, California, where Retta and her family live in a sprawling adobe ranch house on Desert Lily Street. The move west from their former home in Pennsylvania has proved challenging to her mother, father, and younger brother who embrace their new California lifestyle. Retta, however, misses the wooded fields, the tree-lined roads, and the quiet green of rural Pennsylvania.

Much of the action of the story occurs at a two hundred acre ranch outside Thirty-nine Palms where Dallas Dobson has secured employment for the summer. Rancho Arabian is a prosperous layout with valuable Arabian stock, and Dallas has heavy responsibilities with little leisure time. Retta often drives to Rancho Arabian in the evenings to help with the chores in order to spend time with Dallas. She grows to love the austere beauty of the ranch, the vast, barren expanses that shimmer in the summer sun, the stark mountains that rim the far horizon, and the permeating smell of creosote and sandalwood that hangs in the desert air. When the opportunity arises to return to the beloved, familiar area in Pennsylvania called God's Own Acres, Retta chooses to do so, but she realizes she has gained an appreciation for California.

Social Sensitivity

First a Dream contains little of a socially sensitive nature. There is brief reference to the Norongo. Indian tribe and the reservation on which they live.

Daly uses the word "Indian" when referring to a Norongo person, a word which some people deem insensitive.



Literary Qualities

When examining the craftsmanship of *First a Dream*, one is immediately aware of Daly's forceful use of language. She has a marked ability for writing descriptive prose that creates sharp, focused images for her readers, whether of a "torn turkey with grizzled wattles," cigarette smoke that makes "a wispy second ceiling," or eyes that are a "bright watery blue, the whites crisscrossed with tiny red veins." The precision of her words as she writes of smell and touch and feelings evoke rich sensory experiences for her readers. For example, she says of Retta, She was acutely aware of mint fragrance, the drift of sandalwood scent from the open desert, and the heat of Dallas's bare arms and chest, all mingled with the deeply stirring odors of new birth still clinging to his hands.

A second quality that enhances the book and adds to its merit for the young adult reader is the skill Daly demonstrates in portraying the legitimacy of young love. Her characters are treated seriously; their feelings are presented without condescension.

Caught in the joy and the pain, the certainty and the uncertainty of first love, Retta and Dallas mirror the lives of readers and give insight into emotions and feelings. Because there has been an honest rendering of the struggle to come of age, the reader can accept as valid the book's premise: before one can experience mature love, one must come to know oneself.

A weakness of the novel that one cannot ignore is its unexpected, highly improbable ending. The book appears to be moving toward resolution as Dallas matures and assures Retta their love is sufficiently strong to survive separation. Retta has come to terms with living in California and has crystallized her feelings toward Dallas.

Such an open-ended resolution mirrors the experiences of many young lovers who are separated by schooling. Daly, however, veers from realism as she contemplates the impending separation of Retta and Dallas. She chooses to make Retta an heiress of a small fortune and return her to Zenith to finish school where she and Dallas will see each other daily. There is so much that is implausible in this development that one wonders about the author's motivation to make everything all right in the end. In spite of this fairy-tale, happy-ever-after quality given the ending, the book has merit as an honest rendering of the complexities of young love.



Themes and Characters

First a Dream is a book about love, the dream of love, and the struggle to come of age. It creates two attractive role models in Retta and Dallas. Retta Caldwell is almost seventeen, a winsome heroine who exhibits few of the negative traits associated with rebellious teen-agers. She is responsible and trustworthy, has a loving relationship with her family, is unusually sensitive toward the feelings of others, and possesses a strong moral code. She cheerfully helps her mother with household chores in order that Mrs. Caldwell may have time for her own activities. When her father criticizes an article she has written for the family newspaper, Retta is neither defensive nor affronted, but accepts his remarks with good humor.

When she sits near an elderly woman at the shopping mall, she intuitively recognizes that the woman is lonely and impoverished. Retta is responsive and caring, sharing her coffee and cookies and listening to the woman's talk without condescension. When Dallas plans to take without permission one of the horses and a valuable saddle and other trappings from Rancho Arabian to appear in a rodeo, Retta is horrified. She insists to do so would be equivalent to stealing and is adamant that she will never return to the ranch if Dallas persists in his plans.

The major flaw with Retta is that the author has made her too perfect and she lacks dimension as a character.

Retta's character suffers further when the author chooses to make her an heiress who inherits a small fortune from an unexpected source. The inheritance is so improbable as to give the novel the air of a fairy tale, and Retta appears manipulated and one-sided.

However, Daly has written two previous books on the theme of young love, and it is her skill in handling this theme that rescues Retta from the overly sentimental and endears her to her readers as a worthy heroine. Retta has fallen in love with the boy Dallas, but is unprepared for the demands the emerging man is making. Daly vividly portrays Retta's conflict as she seeks to discover what is right for her as well as for Dallas. Her struggle is sincere, often painful, and belies her storybook image.

Dallas Dobson fares better than Retta as a fully developed character who acts with autonomy. Dallas has many attractive qualities that are ennobling: he is handsome, serious, trustworthy, modest, and unswervingly loyal. However, there are other dimensions to his personality. He is aware of his lack of family status, and he is sometimes uncertain of his worth. He is haunted by his illegitimacy and is overly grateful that his father chose to keep him when he was a baby. His excessive gratitude enables his father to abuse Dallas.

When he arrives at Palm Springs with his clothes in a paper sack, one sees in Dallas a humanity that is denied Retta.

The autonomy of Dallas is further confirmed when he decides to do an ignoble deed and ride in the Danning rodeo. To do so, he must borrow without permission a priceless, trained Arabian horse and the valuable silver and turquoise ornamentation the horse wears.

While Dallas knows he is doing wrong, he sees it as an opportunity to win a trophy that will impress his father. In the end, Dallas misses the rodeo when he chooses to stay at the ranch with one of the horses that unexpectedly goes into labor. The decision is a rite of passage for Dallas because he emerges from his struggle with a clearer understanding of himself and his goals. He decides to return to Pennsylvania, finish his last semester of school, and enter college on a scholarship.



Topics for Discussion

1. Retta Caldwell is an admirable heroine. She is trustworthy, dependable, responsible, and mature. She is loyal to her friends and sensitive and caring about others, and she and her family experience few conflicts. Has the author been fair to the reader in making Retta so exemplary? Would you have liked Retta better or less if she had exhibited negative traits as well as good ones?

2. Is it realistic that a knowledgeable, seasoned ranch owner would leave his ranch and herd of valuable Arabian horses in the care of a nineteen-year-old whom he hardly knows?

What are some of the reasons one might or might not take this course of action?

3. Retta is angered by Mrs. Bradley's rule that there be no females in Dallas's quarters at any time. Was Mrs. Bradley justified in making the rule? Was Retta justified in feeling resentful and angry?

Give reasons for your answers.

4. Some people would argue that Dallas's devotion to his father was unjustified in light of his father's abusive nature. Are there limits for loving or not loving a parent? What does a child owe to his parents? Are there acts for which a child cannot forgive his parents?

5. Retta wrote articles for the newspaper about unusual features of her community such as the church St. Francis of the Rocks. If you were writing about your community, what are some of its unusual features or events that you would write about? Are there issues affecting your community that are unique to it that you can discuss?

6. Retta was stunned when she learned Dallas was going to take the prized horse and valuable saddle to the rodeo without permission. Do you agree with the arguments Retta gives Dallas, or do you agree with the arguments Dallas gives for his actions? Why?

7. If Dallas had gone to the rodeo as he intended, how might the outcome of the story have changed?

8. Would it be possible for Aunt Blue to purchase three hundred acres of land and leave large sums of money to Retta and her brother when she was working as a domestic? Support your arguments for or against such a possibility.

9. In the novel that precedes *First a Dream*, Retta's parents give her the option of staying in Pennsylvania or going with them to California. She chooses to go with her family. Why does she now decide to leave Thirtynine Palms and return to Zenith?



10. Retta's decision to accept the inheritance means leaving her family and moving to Zenith. Discuss why this is or is not a good decision.

11. Retta is the recipient of 300 acres of land willed to her by Aunt Blue.

According to her father the land could be divided into 600 half-acre lots and sold at an average price of ten thousand dollars a lot. The family calculates this makes the land worth \$600,000.

What mistake has Daly made in her mathematical computation?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and write a paper on one of the following topics: 1) the American rodeo; 2) the Arabian horse; 3) ranching and ranch life; 4) desert plants (e.g., sandalwood); 5) Native Americans indigenous to California; or 6) the American cowboy.

2. One of the skills of a good reader is the ability to read critically. The evening before Dallas leaves for California, he shops at the Crossroads General Store in Zenith, Pennsylvania. His plane arrives in Palm Springs, California the following morning at about 8:00 A.M. Has Daly been careless with her timing? Are there direct flights between Philadelphia and Palm Springs?

Check with a local travel agent to see if Dallas could have arranged a schedule such as that given in the book. Report your findings.

3. Retta's first article for her father's newspaper was about what one could buy for a dollar or less at the mall. Do research in a mall in your area and write a similar article.

4. The Caldwells' move from the East Coast to the West Coast is not unusual in today's mobile society. Discuss a move you have made and the changes it has effected. Compare your reactions to those of Retta, who feels alienated from the joy and security of her life in Pennsylvania.

5. It is a common fantasy for one to suddenly become an heir or heiress as did Retta. If you should unexpectedly become wealthy, what would you do with your wealth? Consider both your serious and your whimsical goals.

6. Write an alternate ending for this story that would resolve the conflict and bring satisfaction to the reader.



For Further Reference

Fakih, Kimberly Olson. "The Long Wait for Maureen Daly." *Publishers Weekly* (June 27, 1986): 36-39. The author conducts a telephone interview with Daly preceding the publication of *Acts of Love*. Daly speaks of the deaths of her husband and daughter and her motivation for writing the novel. She also talks about the publication of *Seventeenth Summer* and her own feelings about its instant success and durability.

The article takes a look at Daly's career and fills in the years since *Seventeenth Summer* made its debut.

Fuller, Muriel, ed. *More Junior Authors*.

New York: H. W. Wilson, 1963: 59.

The article contains a brief autobiographical sketch by Daly and a look at the work she did prior to 1963.

3174 First a Dream Richardson, Lisa Ann. "A Retrospective with Maureen Daly." *Journal of Reading* (February 1993): 424-426.

Richardson records an interview with Daly in which Daly discusses her motivation for writing *Seventeenth Summer* and the influence it has had on young adult literature.

Daly also details a book she is currently writing about a young woman of today who decides to enter a convent. She says the book, like her previous young adult novels, will be a love story and is tentatively titled *Mariette Loves J.C.* The article contains a photograph of Daly.

Related Titles

Acts of Love is the book that precedes First a Dream and tells of the meeting and falling in love of Retta Caldwell and Dallas Dobson. It is set in Zenith, Pennsylvania, and includes the struggle of the Caldwells with the State Highway Commission that ultimately confiscates a portion of the family's land to build a new highway. When the opportunity arises for Mr. Caldwell to sell his business and remaining acres, he does so and moves his family to California. The joy Retta and Dallas share in their relationship is overshadowed by the pain of their separation.

Eventually Dallas secures employment near Retta for the summer months so they may spend time together. The book ends with the anticipated arrival of Dallas in Palm Springs. Acts of Love is a poignant, sensitive portrayal of first love that gives the experience credibility and legitimacy.

Like Acts of Love and First a Dream, Seventeenth Summer is the story of a girl's growing up and falling in love.

Angie Morrow is seventeen, just graduated from high school, and marking time until she goes away to college.

Then she meets Jack. Angie is more amazed than anyone when Jack begins to date her, because boys have never paid her much attention. Through the months of June, July, and August, their feelings for each other deepen. Their pleasure in the relationship, however, is made bittersweet by the knowledge that September will bring inevitable changes. Told in first person, Seventeenth Summer is an honest, straightforward probing of a girl's emotions through an intensely personal period of her life as she experiences first love.

The novel was dramatized in 1949 and filmed by Warner Brothers.



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