

Flying Changes Short Guide

Flying Changes by Lynn Hall

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Overview

Flying Changes is seventeen-year-old Denny Browner's account of a little less than a week in her life. She learns several unpleasant lessons about life, from being loved and left by a rodeo cowboy to coping with her recently crippled father. As she confronts adult responsibilities she grows somewhat wiser and more worldly. This makes Flying Changes a rite-of-passage story; Denny's handling of the challenges during a short period in her life mark her transition from adolescent to adult.

About the Author

Lynn Hall was born November 9, 1937, in Lombard, Illinois, to Raymond Edwin Hall and Alice (nee Seeds) Hall. Her father worked for Standard Oil; her mother was a high school teacher of English and Spanish. While she was still a child, her family moved near Des Moines, Iowa. Hall remembers being a loner, not for a particular reason, since her family life was a happy one; she simply preferred being alone. She developed a fondness for animals, especially horses. When fourteen years old, she used money she had earned to buy herself a horse. She rode everyday; her knowledge of horses provides backgrounds for several of her books.

After graduating from high school, Hall held a wide variety of jobs in Colorado, Texas, Indiana, Kentucky, and Wisconsin, as well as Iowa. On May 1, 1960, she married Dean W. Green; they were divorced in September 1961. From 1955 to 1966, she seems to have been unsatisfied with her life, moving as she did from one unfulfilling job to another, and having what appears to have been an unfulfilling marriage. She remembers being inspired to write by seeing a badly written, inaccurate horse book in a book store; she believed she could do better. She sold her chinchilla herd to pay for her living expenses while writing her first book, *The Shy Ones*, about a dog. Horse stories soon followed, and by the end of 1968, Hall had established herself as a full-time writer.

In the early 1970s, Hall moved to the country, living in a farmhouse. In the late 1970s, she built a stone cottage she calls Touchstone. There, she lives with Cocker Spaniels, horses, and other animals. Her love of country life and animals continues to inform her writings.

In 1972, her book *Sticks and Stones* was selected a "best book" for young adults by the American Library Association, as were *The Leaving* in 1980 and *Uphill All the Way* in 1984. In 1981, *The Leaving* received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award.

Setting

The action takes place on a rural homestead in Kansas. It is comprised of an old, two-story house, a saddle shop next to a highway, a "big old barn that looked like a giant hen with all the little sheds as its chicks," and a corral.

The house connects Denny to the past—to her grandparents, her father, and her mother, who just barges in one day after having been gone for many years.

The shop represents hope for a better future. By the book's end, the shop is undergoing changes that may make it more appealing to customers and more profitable. The barn and corral and the horses in them represent Denny's growing self-discipline. The area in which Denny lives is hot, dry, and lonely.



Social Sensitivity

Flying Changes' sexual frankness is bound to be noticed by readers. Until recent times, unvarnished discussions of sex were taboo in literature for young adults. Hall may be capitalizing on the growing openness about sex in writings for young readers—she may even be widening the opening a bit—but her presentation of Denny's thoughts and feelings about sex help advance the novella's themes. Denny begins the novella with a naive, childish view of sex and what it means to grownups; her attitudes about giving up her virginity and making a man love her may well be shared by some teen-age readers of the book. Hall does such readers a service by contrasting Denny's unrealistic, romantic notions about sexual intercourse with the complex realities of the sex act. As Denny learns, Tyler Oneota can and probably does have sex with many different women who follow the rodeo circuit; the sex act means far less to him than it does to Denny. Denny's wanting it to mean more to him changes nothing; for Tyler it was merely a brief fling. A wiser Denny may use greater wisdom in choosing a sex partner in the future.

The novella deals with other troublesome social issues that are of importance. Denny has lived in a motherless home since she was a little girl. She may love her father, but he is a ne'er-do-well who sexually exploits women and brags about his conquests. He is absent for long periods while on the rodeo circuit. Thus, Denny has been raised primarily by her grandmother. It has been a lonely, hard life with little money and little affection. Given the life Denny has led, it is no big surprise that she leaps at a fantasized opportunity for love and security with Tyler, who she hopes will take over the responsibilities of provider now that her father is unable to participate in rodeos. Instead, she learns that she must provide her own security. Each step in improving the training of the horse she hopes to sell marks a step in the direction of self-confidence and independence.

One of the tougher lessons in life is that a person must make her or his own security; this Denny can plainly see in her mother, who actually did what Denny hoped to do. Her mother Rita married an irresponsible rodeo cowboy who treated her like dirt; eventually she abandoned both husband and child and learned to fend for herself, owning her own dog grooming business and supporting herself with it. Hall offers no excuses for Rita abandoning Denny, but she serves as a clear example to Denny of what could happen to her if she fails to learn to take care of herself and exercises poor judgment in choosing a husband.



Literary Qualities

Denny tells her own story in the first person. The prose style is workmanlike but too sophisticated for Denny. Still, the point of view is consistent and the events are dramatic enough to hold one's attention. The characterization of Denny is above average in its complexity, giving her a realistic personality.

And the melancholy, sometimes bitter, tone of the novella enhances its plot and themes, making *Flying Changes* a notably honest and forthright portrayal of a teen-ager dealing with harsh realities. Combine this with Hall's consistent use of symbolism to represent Denny's growth, and *Flying Changes* becomes exceptional literary fare.

The buckskin filly that Denny trains is a symbol for Denny. Just as the filly must learn to do a flying change, Denny must learn to shift direction abruptly in her own life. As the horse makes progress, so does Denny. When the filly actually makes a flying change, perhaps Denny has learned to be quick on her feet, too. Certainly, in less than a week, life throws several big obstacles in her path that she must dodge away from.

Another important symbol is the family home. It represents at least two generations of disappointment and anger. When Rita returns to it, she returns to the fountainhead of her repressed anger; there she will care for Doe and humiliate him, in the same house where he humiliated her. The house is where Denny has sex with Tyler; the results are Denny's repressing her feelings for Tyler and feeling of betrayal when he leaves. Her grandfather lived there while repressing his desires for adventure on the rodeo circuit. The house represents Denny's unhappy family, and through Tyler, her potential for an unhappy future.

On the other hand, the shop could represent a happier future. Although Denny and Tyler spent a good deal of time together in the store, it is mostly associated with Denny's family's unrealized potential. When Rita begins to make savvy changes to the store's merchandise, perhaps drawing in more customers and improving sales, one has a vision of what the family fortunes could have been like had she stood up to Doe instead of leaving. A successful store would enable Denny to continue to pursue her interest in training horses by providing additional income to the family, and the store itself would allow her to put her knowledge of horses and riding gear to good use. The changes it is undergoing at the end of *Flying Changes* suggest that the future may be bright.



Themes and Characters

Hall's books usually feature independent, strong-minded young women.

Part of the appeal of the books comes from following the protagonists' increasing competence in coping with life's problems. The books subtly suggest to young readers that they can not only learn to cope with adult problems but that they can even triumph over the problems, turning each step in acquiring self-sufficiency into a victory in the process of learning to control one's destiny.

Denny is a more complex character than most of Hall's triumphant young women. For one thing, there is no great achievement of individualistic control of one's life in *Flying Changes*. Denny accomplishes much in less than a week, but her future as an adult is still uncertain at the novella's end. Few people are going to revolutionize their lives in less than a week; Denny's growth remains credible by leaving her much more to learn. Even so, she contrasts markedly with such characters as Jane Cahill of *The Solitary*, who is a titanic emblem of independence by the novel's end. Denny's triumphs are less certain.

Each advance she makes brings with it new troubles and challenges. Events continually surprise her, sometimes almost paralyzing her, as when her mother marches into her home and takes over. Denny is unsure of what to do and therefore does nothing. This makes her an attractive character because it makes her seem real; anyone could be confused by the events she experiences.

None of the other characters is developed in depth. Each contributes to the novella by facing Denny with hard facts that she must learn to cope with.

Tyler shows her that princes on white horses are not going to come to rescue her, even if she offers them devoted love and vigorous sex. Her mother brings forth confused, complex feelings about family matters. Through her influence, Denny confronts the consequences of her father's cruelty to her mother, and then the issue of revenge, when her mother makes a point of flaunting her affections for other men in the presence of Denny's now crippled father. Denny's grandmother tells her about how the twisted family relationships came to pass, explaining Denny's grandfather's own repressed yearnings and how they affected his children. Gramma B. also surprises Denny by declaring that she despised Rita for simply taking Doe's callous abuse; further, she now respects Rita more because Rita has chosen to return to abuse the now helpless Doe the way he once abused her. This is a profoundly nasty thought, revealing the true complexity of hateful, angry emotions that twist some people's views of life. When Doe returns, he is sad, not at all the active, carefree soul he had been. Given his helplessness and the long endured anger and hatred of the other adults in her life, Denny becomes a lonely, even isolated figure.

There is no one she can count on but herself. In less than one week she has been pushed out of childhood; she has had to learn to make a flying change just as her horse



has. The book's symbolism offers a hopeful note at the end: Not only is Denny able to sell the horse, thus earning on her own some badly needed money for the family, but the horse, whose development has paralleled that of Denny throughout the story, has learned to make a flying change. Perhaps Denny, too, has learned that important maneuver, so that she can shift her own life away from the unhappy direction it has long followed.

The themes of *Flying Changes* are tough ones. Sexual promiscuity, sexual infidelity, repressed anger, repressed desires, and outright hatred all manifest themselves in the course of the narrative. Denny has long been aware of her father's sexual promiscuity. She has often heard him brag to other men about his sexual conquests; she has heard him describe the various pick up lines and false promises of love that he has used to persuade women to sleep with him. Even as she has sex with Tyler, she wonders whether the lines he uses on her are as false as those she has heard her father talk about using.

She hopes that by giving her all to Tyler, including her virginity, he will love her: "This was me, giving something I held dear and precious for the first time ever. It meant something to me. It meant a whole hell of a lot to me. Pretty soon now I'd find out what it meant to him." It meant little to him.

Denny recalls throwing herself vigorously into having sex with him, and has the natural feeling that there must have been something she had done wrong, that maybe she was not good at making love. She seems eventually to realize that her mistake was one of judgment, not body: A sexually promiscuous man is unlikely to find any woman's sexual favors special.

Her disappointing relationship with Tyler prepares Denny to understand her mother's behavior. Cheated on and humiliated, Rita abandoned Doe and Denny when Denny was a little girl.

Her return is startling, and her brash, bossy behavior is outrageous, but Denny learns how she had endured years of her husband's sexual infidelity, and how that infidelity had blighted her life. Her return for revenge is perverse, not escaping that, but Denny is able to understand what motivates Rita. Once young like Denny, Rita had succeeded in lassoing her rodeo lover into a loveless marriage. As a young mother, she had repressed her anger at how Doe mistreated her, until she left.

That anger seems to have festered in her in all the years since; when she learns of Doe's crippling injuries, she returns to make their old home hers, and she releases some of her anger by making sure that Doe will be under her power, subject to her whims.

The matter of repressed anger is tied to repressed desires. Rita wanted a dashing rodeo cowboy hero for a husband; she repressed this desire as she suffered under the reality of a thoughtless, selfish husband. In an odd twist, Gramma B. reveals that she had a hidden desire for Rita to stand up to Doe; Gramma B. despised Rita in part



because Rita simply endured Doe's cruelty. Further, her own husband had strong but repressed desires. He had wanted to follow the rodeo circuit himself, but had devoted himself to a settled family life instead. When his sons had shown promise as rodeo performers, one actually followed his desires and became a rodeo cowboy. His brother, actually the more talented performer of the two, repressed his yearnings and became a settled family man like his father. Yet, when Denny's grandfather died, he left his house and land to Doe, the wayward son, not to Denny's uncle. This was an expression of the grandfather's repressed desires, which were lived out by Doe. Throughout *Flying Changes*, the repression of strong desires seems to have painful, hurtful effects on family members. Hall offers no solutions to the problem of repressed desires, only noting their terrible destructive power when not openly acknowledged.

Among the destructive effects that result from sexual abuse, repressed anger, and repressed desires, is hatred.

Gramma B. hates Rita, making it impossible for her to remain in her lifelong home when Rita returns. Thus Gramma B. is separated from Denny, the granddaughter she has raised. Rita abandoned Denny when her family life became unbearable; she returns for revenge, a pointless exercise in hatred.

Her knowledge of the retail business is the only real ray of hope she brings with her; unlike Doe, she may actually be able to earn a decent living with the family store, taking care of the family's financial needs. Denny herself has plenty of strong motivations for hating Rita, Doe, and Tyler, but instead her emotions are confused. She is more puzzled than angry at the behavior of her three closest family members. This is evidence of her good heart, leaving her at the book's end with the possibility of taking control of her life and turning it in a constructive direction independent of her family.



Topics for Discussion

1. Flying Changes bluntly, but not graphically, discusses Denny Browner's sexual relationship with Tyler Oneota.

Is this appropriate material for a book intended to be read by teen-agers?

2. Was Denny stupid for thinking that having sex with Tyler would encourage him to love her? Should she have known better?

3. Denny's father Doe is talked about a great deal before he actually arrives on the scene. What sort of man does he appear to be before he shows up? Is this image different from who he really is?

4. Denny's mother Rita returns after years of absence to have her revenge on Doe by doing to him what he had done to her. Gramma B. seems to like her for it. Is this really an admirable thing for Denny's mother to do?

5. The life of a rodeo cowboy seems to be tough, while earning little money.

Why would anyone want to devote his or her life to participating in rodeos if he or she cannot make a good living?

6. Denny's Uncle Ranger seems to be a hard-working, responsible family man, just what most parents seem to want their sons to be. Why did Ranger's father not favor him over Doe?

7. Why does Denny not throw her mother out of the house when Rita barges in?

8. Denny's family is an unhappy one.

What can we as readers learn from a novella about an unhappy, mixed-up family like Denny's?

9. Is Denny going to end up like her mother?

10. Who was at fault for Rita and Doe's failed marriage?

11. Gramma's attitudes toward marriage surprises Denny. Why would she have those attitudes? Do they make any sense?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is a flying change? Why is it important for a horse to be able to perform one?
2. "Welcome to adulthood, Denny Browner. Whoopee," remarks Denny early in Chapter 1. What happens from Monday, July 10 to Saturday, July 15, to turn Denny from child to grownup?
3. The title *Flying Changes* seems to be a metaphor for what happens to Denny during the novella. What flying changes does she have to make?
4. "Impatient with my life," says Denny, "I swung the buckskin filly around and booted her into a lope."

How does the progress in training the horse symbolize Denny's own growth?

5. Describe the real day-to-day life of a rodeo cowboy like Tyler or Doe.
6. What events take place in a rodeo?

Describe them, emphasizing what makes each one special.

7. Denny makes some money by training and selling horses. What is the business of raising and selling horses like? Who makes a good living doing it? Who does not?
8. How well developed are the characters in *Flying Changes*? How do their interactions develop the themes of the novella?
9. Denny's store sells saddles and other riding equipment. What different kinds of saddles are there? What kinds would be suitable to beginning riders?

What would very experienced riders prefer?

10. Have you ever been in a roadside store like the one Denny helps run?

What did you find there? What was its atmosphere like? How did the people there treat you?

11. Hall is noted for her portrayals of animals. Look at some of her other books that have animals in them. Are her portrayals accurate? What roles do the animals play in the novels?

For Further Reference

Commire, Anne, ed. "Hall, Lynn." In *Something About the Author*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1987: 97-104. Includes extensive autobiographical account of Hall's background and career.

Hall, Lynn. "Lynn Hall." In *Fifth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1983: 145-147.

Brief autobiographical article about how Hall became a writer and her interest in animals.

Review. *Publishers Weekly* 238 (May 31, 1991): 77. Highly recommends *Flying Changes*.

Rochman, Hazel. Review. *Booklist* 87 (June 15, 1991): 1951. Rochman declares, "This is Hall at her best."

Stevenson, Deborah. Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 44 (July/August 1991): 262. Admires the characterization in particular.

Strickland, Charlene. Review. *School Library Journal* 37 (July 1991): 88.

Admires *Flying Changes* and recommends it for Hall's "more mature fans."

Related Titles

Most of Hall's books feature strong, independent young women. In the case of *Denny*, the young woman is shown as she acquires some inner strength, but by the book's end, she still has far to go before becoming truly independent. *Flying Changes* follows the pattern of most of Hall's novels by featuring a broken family. In the case of *Flying Changes*, the mother has been absent for many years; in the case of *A Killing Freeze*, the mother has long been dead; in the case of *The Solitary*, the mother has murdered the father; in other works, the protagonists must deal with similar sorts of dysfunctional families.



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