

# Ginger Pye Short Guide

## Ginger Pye by Eleanor Estes

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## Overview

Ginger Pye is a warm and involving story about the Pye family and their beloved Ginger, a brown-and-white fox terrier puppy. In addition to the endearing antics of the dog and the close relationships in the Pye family, the story features a mystery at its core that will keep readers turning the pages. When ten-year-old Jerry Pye and his nine-year-old sister, Rachel, first take their puppy home, mysterious footsteps follow them. Family members catch glimpses of a lurking stranger in a mustard-yellow hat, whom they nickname Unsavory Character. The children take pride in their smart dog, who has earned a certain distinction in the town, and when Ginger disappears on Thanksgiving Day while the family is eating dinner, they believe that Unsavory Character has taken their pet. They launch an unsuccessful search for Ginger, and the suspense builds until, months later, Ginger—now a full-grown dog—is found and reunited with the Pyles. The author has said that Ginger was based on a dog that she and her brothers had as children, a dog that also disappeared on Thanksgiving Day and reappeared the following spring.

## About the Author

Eleanor Rosenfeld Estes was born on May 9, 1906, in West Haven, Connecticut, to Louis and Caroline Gewecke Rosenfeld. Her father died when Estes was a child, and her mother worked as a dressmaker. Estes has credited her parents with instilling in her a love of books. She has cited as another important early influence her mother's skill at dramatic storytelling and her extensive repertoire of folktales, songs, and anecdotes. Estes always wanted to be a writer, although she never set out to write for young adults.

Her own childhood provided an appropriate storehouse of ideas and experiences. Estes and her sister and two brothers were raised in West Haven, which she has described as a "perfect town to grow up in," because it offered an appealing mix of small town and country life. West Haven appears in the Moffat books and in *Ginger Pye* as the fictional town of Cranbury.

After graduating from high school, she went to work in the children's department of the New Haven Free Public Library, where in 1928 she became the children's librarian. In 1931 she won a Caroline M. Hewins scholarship for children's librarians to the Pratt Institute Library School in New York City. In 1932 she married a fellow student, Rice Estes, later a professor of library science and director of the Pratt Institute Library. In that same year she began working in the children's department of the New York Public Library. When her first book, *The Moffats*, was accepted for publication in 1940, she left the library to write full-time.

*The Middle Moffat*, *Rufus M.*, and *The Hundred Dresses* were named Newbery Honor Books. *Ginger Pye* won the 1952 Newbery Medal, as well as the 1951 New York Herald Tribune Festival Award.

Although *Ginger Pye* is generally considered to be a lesser achievement than the author's earlier works, the enduring popularity of the Pye family and Ginger, their "intellectual" dog, resulted in the appearance of a sequel, *Pinky Pye*.

Estes continued to publish books that were well received by both young readers and critics. The prolific author wrote fifteen books for children, as well as an adult novel and numerous magazine articles. She died on July 15, 1988, in Hamden, Connecticut.



## Setting

Estes effectively uses the small-town environment of Cranbury and its surrounding countryside as the setting of *Ginger Pye*. Rachel and Jerry explore nearby fields and farms, swim in the reservoir, pick berries by the railroad station, take trips to the huge scenic rocks that border the town, sled down snow-covered hills in the winter, and venture into the skeleton houses under construction in the town. Nature and the change of seasons provide a frame for the action and a metaphoric reassurance that good times will indeed follow bad, happiness will follow sorrow.

Simple descriptive passages evoke the children's love for their town and its natural attractions.

The book's temporal setting is not as well defined. Small details, such as the use of gas lamps and trolleys, the relative rarity of automobiles, and women not being able to serve on juries, indicate that the story takes place in the past, probably in the late 1910s. The setting does not seem dated, however, because the characters and situations in *Ginger Pye* are, in large part, universal to childhood. The hints scattered by the author throughout the book are likely to interest rather than confuse, and some readers may even be spurred on to minor detective work in an attempt to identify the time period more precisely.

## Social Sensitivity

Ginger Pye contains no overt violence, but the author knows her audience well enough to address an aspect of life that ordinarily fascinates children. For example, Gracie the Cat has a habit of ripping open the stomachs of her prey if the Pyes' reactions to her catches are not sufficiently effusive. The children shudder at the story of Bit-Nose Ned, whose nose was bitten off by a dog and had to be surgically reattached. None of these anecdotes is described graphically, but Estes' concern obviously lies in depicting a realistic children's world rather than in whitewashing a story. At the close of the book, Ginger's suffering at the hands of his abductors is alluded to but not overemphasized; excitement about his escape and the joy of his reunion with the Pyes balance the reader's sympathy for his suffering.

## Literary Qualities

Ginger Pye is told from the third-person point of view with alternating perspectives. The narrative focuses on Rachel's perspective. In one very funny section, the viewpoint is that of Ginger Pye himself. The author makes extensive use of humor, often through Rachel's fascination with the differences in the sounds and meaning of words—"vilyun" sounds more "vilyunous" than "villain"—or through dialogue, particularly exchanges with Uncle Benny. The author captures the natural rhythm of children's speech and their interest in word play and usage. Rachel and Jerry tell each other an ongoing story about the adventures of Martin Boomberrnicks, a character who assumes various guises. When Mrs. Pye asks Rachel where she got the name "Boomberrnicks," Rachel does not know, but readers understand the significance of private naming.

Estes also accurately conveys the importance of imagination and a sense of wonder. Rachel in particular likes to indulge in "what ifs," and the book contains many references to fairy tales and stories with which children may be familiar—"The Snow Queen," "The Tinder Box," Tom Sawyer—attesting to an important childhood connection between reality and fantasy.

Estes' books tend to be episodic rather than tightly plotted or organized. Some critics have asserted that Ginger Pye's extensive use of flashbacks, anecdotes, and introspective questioning interrupts the progression of the narrative and may cause younger readers to lose the thread of the story. On the other hand, such devices may cause readers to more closely identify with the characters whose perspectives are explored.

Another criticism concerns the somewhat melodramatic resolution of the book. The reason for Ginger Pye's disappearance may not strike readers as believable: Ginger's talents have led to his abduction and training for a vaudeville act. The conclusion of the mystery thus seems rather forced, but the emotions stirred by Ginger's reunion with his family may well alleviate any sense of contrivance.



## Themes and Characters

The simple and straightforward themes of *Ginger Pye* are exemplified in the three major characters: Rachel, her brother Jerry, and Ginger the dog. Estes convincingly portrays the deep love between the children and their pet. The children's affection for animals extends to their neighbors' pets and contrasts sharply with the bad treatment that Ginger receives at the hands of the villains. This central concern for pets first appears as Jerry wonders if Gracie the Cat would be jealous of a new puppy. His sister and mother reassure him, and the dog and cat establish a satisfactory friendship.

A related theme deals with loyalty, including the children's loyalty to their pets, Ginger's loyalty to the Pyes, and family members' loyalty to one another.

Even though Ginger disappears for many months, the children never stop searching for him or thinking of him.

They refuse to adopt another pet to take Ginger's place and never give up hope that he will be found. Even after his lengthy absence, the full-grown Ginger still longs to return to his owners, and his memories of the Pyes lead to a gratifying resolution. The relationship between Rachel and Jerry illustrates an important aspect of the loyalty theme.

Although Estes portrays their small quarrels and frustrations very realistically and often humorously, sister and brother remain very close, and their supportive responses in the face of trouble are one of the main strengths of the book. Readers will be able to identify and laugh along with the typical sibling relationship, even as they are comforted by the children's loyalty to and consideration of one another.

As in the Moffat books, Estes presents a narrative driven by themes that may help readers face situations themselves.

*Ginger Pye* shows likable, involving characters undergoing an ordeal that many children have experienced: the loss of a beloved pet. Yet Jerry and Rachel refuse to give way to despair or to let themselves be distracted from their search for Ginger, and in the end, their faith and determination pay off. Estes demonstrates that sincerity and perseverance can turn things around; her respect for children's abilities to set and pursue their own goals is inspiring even to adult readers. Furthermore, the change-of-seasons motif present throughout the story directly indicates that sadness and unhappiness do give way to hope and joy, that good times follow bad just as spring follows winter.

The author excels in her portrayal of characters and realistic family relationships. Rachel and Jerry are the most fully realized human characters, while the hugely entertaining *Ginger Pye* ranks as one of young adult literature's most memorable dogs. Ginger is loyal, mischievous, and smart. Nicknamed "the intellectual dog," Ginger tracks





Jerry to school one day and suddenly appears in the classroom window with a pencil in his jaws.

Ginger Pye introduces a range of unique characters, including three-year-old Uncle Benny, renowned for being such a young uncle. Uncle Benny's pronouncements are as amusing as his attachment to his "Bubbah," a favorite old blanket. The children admire lanky, good-natured Sam Doody, an older boy whose friendliness to them plays an important role in the story.

Estes provides entertaining sketches of the Cranbury personalities with whom the children interact. The accumulation of details makes each character real, such as their friend Dick Badger, known as the "perpendicular swimmer" because he swims up and down rather than on top of the water like other people. The weakest character is that of Wally Bullwinkle, a bigger boy in Jerry's class who plays a role in Ginger's disappearance. Estes portrays Wally's unalleviated surliness and his motives in a vague and unconvincing manner at odds with other depictions in the book.

The book focuses on Jerry and Rachel Pye, and the story is conveyed almost entirely through them. Jerry's perspective reflects his straightforward approach to problems, his more authoritative status as older brother, and his love for Ginger. Jerry's actions propel the plot. Rachel's feelings, fears, and reactions are more detailed. Sometimes intimidated by what she sees as Jerry's greater experience and spirit of adventure, she spends more time mulling over the implications of events. She exhibits thoughtfulness and curiosity about the people around her, and much of the book's richness derives from her memories and musings.

Such details about personality and anecdotes about even minor characters lend flavor to Estes' books. Each character in Ginger Pye stands out as a unique individual with an interesting quirk or attribute—a feature that may be of particular interest to younger readers learning to see themselves and others as recognizable, distinct individuals. The author's descriptions remind even older readers that everyone is special and that children can be particularly perceptive about the people around them. Inarguably, her talent lies in recreating the world of childhood in all its immediacy and fascinating detail.



## Topics for Discussion

1. During what period of history does *Ginger Pye* take place? What clues can you find in the book to support your hypothesis?
2. In chapter 1, when Rachel is thinking of ways to help Jerry raise money, she thinks of her "mite box." What do you think a mite box is? Why?
3. Why do you think Ginger's tail has been cut off? Is Mrs. Pye right in her explanation?
4. Why is Uncle Benny famous in the town of Cranbury? Have you known anyone with an aunt or uncle like Benny?
5. Would it make any difference to the story if the book had a contemporary setting? Why or why not?
6. Is the relationship between Rachel Pye and her brother a realistic one? Why or why not?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In chapter 11, the children are determined to explore Judges Cave. Why is Judges Cave famous? What else can you find out about it?
2. Ginger is trained to perform in a vaudeville act. Write a paper on the history of vaudeville as a form of entertainment.
3. In chapter 8, Mrs. Speedy says that women are not allowed to serve on juries. Why not? When did this change?
4. Mrs. Pye tells Rachel about the "mark" that the tramps have put on their door. What does this mean? What can you find out about tramp or hobo culture? How does this culture differ from the growing homeless population in our contemporary society?
5. Mr. Pye is a famous "bird man."

What is another name for what he does?

Ginger Pye contains many descriptions of interesting bird facts and behavior; explain some of them.

6. Eleanor Estes' book *The Moffats* is also set in the town of Cranbury. What are some of the main differences between the two books? Are there any similarities? Which book do you like better and why?

## For Further Reference

Cameron, Eleanor. *The Green and Burning Tree*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1969.

This collection of essays about the writing and reading of children's books includes several appreciative references to Estes's works. In particular, it cites her use of language to express children's delight in word play and in the making of meaning.

Hopkins, Lee Bennett. "Eleanor Estes."

*In More Books by More People*. New York: Citation Press, 1974. In this interview, Estes discusses her writing career, habits, and the origin of *Ginger Pye*.

Kunitz, Stanley J., and Howard Haycraft, eds. *The Junior Book of Authors*. Rev. ed. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1951. Estes supplies a brief autobiographical sketch describing her childhood in Connecticut and early influences on her writing.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Estes published *Pinky Pye*, a sequel to *Ginger Pye*, in 1958. In the later book, the Pye family, along with Uncle Benny, Ginger, and Gracie the Cat, take a vacation on Fire Island. They discover and adopt Pinky, an engaging kitten that can type and that boxes with Ginger. Although the book is not as compelling or suspenseful as its predecessor, readers who like *Ginger Pye* will enjoy the Pyes' further adventures.

*Ginger Pye* has been adapted to phonograph record and audio tape formats (1969), distributed by Newbery Award Records. In 1975 Miller-Brody Productions released a sound filmstrip of the novel.

Written before *Ginger Pye*, the three Moffat books—*The Moffats*, *The Middle Moffat*, and *Rufus M.*—are probably Estes' best-known and best-loved works. Like *Rachel and Jerry Pye*, the Moffat family lives in the New England town of Cranbury about the time of the First World War. The immense popularity of these stories may stem from their basis in the author's own experiences and recollections.

Estes then published *The Hundred Dresses*, acclaimed for its sympathetic, and at that time unusual, depiction of poverty and prejudice in a child's world.

Her only novel for adults, *The Echoing Green* (1947), also addresses the theme of childhood deprivation.

Estes' novels published after *Ginger Pye* and *Pinky Pye* include *The Witch Family*, about two small girls whose make-believe witches suddenly become real, and *The Alley* and *The Tunnel of Hugsy Goode*, both of which take place in the Brooklyn neighborhood where the Estes family lived for many years before moving to Connecticut.

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