

Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date Short Guide

Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date by Todd Strasser

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Overview

Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date is a lighthearted and breezy novel in which the daily troubles of growing up and socializing are presented humorously. Even the dark details of school life only briefly intrude on the happy, often goofy tone of the narrative. The story is told in alternating short chapters by Nicole and Chase, neighbors who at first do not have much to do with each other. Nicole is a social climber whose life is devoted to looking good and finding a great date for the prom, and Chase is a somewhat childish rebel who is devoted to looking bad and avoiding taking anything, especially proms, seriously. Could anything be more likely than these two falling in love?

About the Author

Todd Strasser was born in New York City on May 5, 1950. He recalls being a rebellious teenager. After graduating from Benoit College in 1974, he had a series of jobs which included street vendor, news reporter, and president of a fortune cookie manufacturer. He married Pamela Older in 1981. His first published novel for young adults, *Angel Dust Blues*, was well received by critics, and Strasser established himself during the 1980s as an extraordinarily productive and versatile writer of books for young people. He often visits high schools as part of his seemingly perpetual research into the interests, concerns, and activities of young adults.

Friends Till the End (1981) and *Rock V Roll Nights* (1982) were named to the American Library Association Best List and *Workin' for Peanuts* (1983; see separate entry, Vol. 8) and *A Very Touchy Subject* (1985) have been made into television motion pictures. *Workin' for Peanuts*, perhaps an echo of Strasser's personal experiences, aired in 1985 as part of *Family Showcase* on HBO; *A Very Touchy Subject* aired in 1992 with the title *Can a Guy Say No?* as an ABC After School Special.



Setting

Timothy Zonin High (known as the Time Zone) seems to be an unexceptional school populated by an assortment of offbeat personalities. Its key areas are the vice principal's office, where Mr. Rope, who almost has a sense of humor, holds court; the hallways, where characters inevitably meet, and which are seven rolling automobile tires wide; the back, where the "stoners" get stoned; the boys room where pizza is sold; and the detention room, not actually shown but always a lurking menace.

Nicole and Chase live next door to each other, where Nicole's mother and Chase's father can see each other through windows while chatting with each other on the phone. Chase's home undergoes mysterious changes where neatness intrudes on what had been disorder. The community seems fairly ordinary, with a suitable number of schools, two-story and ranch-style homes, and a good view of the night sky, where the Milky Way puzzles Chase and his friends.

Social Sensitivity

Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date is a lighthearted comedy not meant to stir great emotions or offer profound thoughts about social ills. It touches on a few of the problems that are found in most American high schools: vandalism, drug abuse, fear of being alone, fear of the future, and teenagers with more energy and free time than good sense. By far the most serious of these social problems is drug abuse.

Chase's father annoys him considerably by repeatedly bringing up the subject of drugs and why Chase should not use them. Chase resents this because it seems clear that when his father was a teenager he himself took drugs. If it was okay for his father why is it not okay for him? Chase reaches a new level of maturity when he finally decides, "It doesn't matter what your parents did. What matters is what you do."

The theme of drug abuse is further developed in the character of Ray, whom everyone suspects of abusing drugs, although Chase, as far as he knows, has never seen him stoned.

Eventually, he finds Ray huddled with the "stoners" at school, smoking marijuana to calm himself before he takes his drivers' examination. When Chase points out to him the folly of his behavior, Ray says not to worry, "You'll never see me drink and drive," missing the point entirely. He is later arrested for driving the wrong way on a freeway while high on LSD. His reasons for abusing drugs are not clear, but he seems to be afraid much of the time, and his father "is this scary son-andwife-beater type." *Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date* is not a deep exploration of despair, but is rather a lighter comic novel, and thus Ray shows signs of straightening his life out at the novel's end.

Another troubling matter is alcohol abuse, routine for some of the minor characters. These young people crave invitations to alcohol-driven make-out parties which are a visible badge of being part of the in-crowd. Dave, Ray, and Chase find themselves cleaning up after vomiting boys as part of Dave's designated-driver service, for which he has a beeper. It is hard to see what the drunks have that is better than what Dave has, but for some reason he is regarded as lower than the drunks because he is sober and merely their driver. When Chase attends such a party for the first time he is out of his element; when he looks in the refrigerator for a drink, Alicia points out that there is plenty of beer.

The other social issues of high school life are bundled up together.

Chase is confused about just who and what he wants to be, and he has plenty of energy for expressing his angst; his mask is that of cut-up, a guy who plays pranks, wears sloppy clothes, and smells bad because, he says, he is protesting America's obsession with hygiene. He is frequently sent to detention by Mr. Rope. Other characters show varying degrees of suffering, none of it extreme. Dave is unhappy that his persona is that of the guy who drives the drunken jocks home, and he is jealous of Chase's



becoming part of the in-crowd. His problems are expressed well, but they are not resolved.

The girls of the novel are concerned primarily with getting dates for the prom and with social climbing. These aspects of their lives are emphasized primarily because Nicole is telling half the story, and she is obsessed with her social standing and how it would be enhanced by attending the prom with the appropriate boy. She discovers that the boy best suited to enhance her social standing and the boy she actually loves are not the same person, creating a small crisis of conscience that she overcomes. She has more important problems such as a fear of what comes next. She has devoted her life to social climbing in high school and has no idea what she will do after graduation. Her father's friend Stacy represents a grim scenario: She too did not know what to do after high school, and when family illness and injury created a huge financial debt, she turned to her only resources and became a stripper.

Other significant social problems, mostly associated with adult life but nonetheless potent forces in young people's lives, are divorce, single parenting, loss of love, and self-destruction. Nicole's parents are going through a nasty, prolonged, and expensive divorce. Nicole somewhat bitterly notes the money that would have sent her to a private college has been spent on the divorce; her devotion to social climbing may be partly a reaction to a home life that is insecure and confusing. Her parents refuse to tell her why they are divorcing, and she only has a few clues about a strip club and Stacy being involved in some vague way. On the other hand, falling in love works wonders: Nicole's mother and Chase's father begin a discreet affair, and all of a sudden they are giving their children fewer arguments about going out and staying out late.

Nicole and Chase seem incredibly slow in figuring out what is happening with their parents, but perhaps the pressures of trying to find their true personal selves preoccupy them enough that they do not think through all the clues their parents have given them. The adult problems are not magically resolved at the end. Indeed, the problems become more complicated for everyone when the parents announce their intention to live together; Nicole and Chase's romance appears to be headed toward new difficulties created by the love affair of the parents.

Literary Qualities

Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date is narrated by Nicole and Chase whose visions of life and fields of activity seem to be a universe apart. Chase is busy figuring out ways to show his dislike of school, and Nicole is busy trying to be the most popular person in school. They seem to be heading in different and mutually exclusive directions. Anyone familiar with romantic stories knows that some patience is required before the two future lovers finally realize that they would be very happy together. "Boys are incredibly thick," complains Nicole: "All they think about is sports and issues related to the removal of female undergarments. Do you think there'd be a prom if it was up to them?" The boys in *Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date* really are incredibly thick-headed, but Nicole is little better. She spends much of her time telling herself that her popularity is all-important, even while she is developing something greater than mere popularity—a loving relationship.

The above traits are all characteristics of the comedy of manners, which is usually a literate comedy that shows the ridiculous side of human social behavior, in this case the playing of pranks, dating, proms, social climbing, romantic love, and the simple business of making money by selling pizza by the slice from a stall in the boys' room. There is not a hint of condescension in the novel, and the characters are well-motivated and shown both in their best and worst lights.

Brad could be just a stereotypical badguy athlete, but he humanizes himself by laughing at how he is possibly the worst center in high school history. He explains to Nicole that he hates basketball and plays it mostly because everyone expects him to, and besides, as bad the team is with him, imagine how bad it would be without him. He goes through countless practices and games, disliking it all because he knows he is an awful player, but he wants to help the other players. Nicole calls him a hero; upon reflection one would be inclined to agree. Thus individualized characters with their good and bad traits realistically depicted are not sacrificed to the comedy, rather the comedy gently makes way for them to be authentic figures.



Themes and Characters

The plot unfolds through the narration of the two protagonists, Nicole and Chase, who at first are barely aware of each other. Nicole is very wrapped up in her planning for the prom, and Chase is equally wrapped up in trying to be uncool. Both are honest speakers who bluntly say what is on their minds.

Nicole knows that she has a fairly plain face and an unshapely body; she masks what she feels are physical flaws by the unobtrusive use of makeup and by carefully chosen clothes.

She knows how important it is to look good or be thought to look good since her ranking in the Time Zone's social hierarchy almost wholly depends on being regarded as pretty. Given her focus on social climbing, it is not surprising that she is somewhat self-absorbed; add in her parents' very rancorous divorce and the mystery of why they have broken up, and her obsession with the prom becomes understandable. She has some control over the social part of her life, whereas she has little control over the rest of it.

Chase is probably the only boy in the novel for whom all of Nicole's efforts to be popular mean nothing.

He is completely indifferent to popularity, and even when he temporarily becomes part of the in-crowd he is not entirely sure he likes it. After Alicia plays sexual come-on games with him, he is sure he does not like being popular. A well-told love story is often built around how two people who seem completely at odds with each other find common ground, then common understanding, and finally common passion. Before our couple-to-be can begin the process of becoming united they must first be confounded elsewhere. Each yearns for another and is denied. Chase wants to date Dulcie and Nicole wants to date Brad— his doing so would catapult her to the pinnacle of popularity at the prom— but each prospective date agrees to go out with someone else. Nicole and Chase, mutually frustrated by their failures to date whom they would, write in a "scam" to convince others that they are romantically involved.

The scheme is Nicole's idea, but Chase is an experienced schemer who takes to her idea quickly. Their problem is that once they start to pretend they cannot figure out where pretense ends and real feelings begin.

Their relationship is worked out with the help and hindrance of the major supporting characters Alicia, Dave, and Ray. "Alicia is my associate, my compatriot, my sparring partner, and my competitor. To those who don't know us well, we must appear to be great friends." This is what Nicole says about Alicia, a girl with wonderful, natural good looks who wears provocative clothes that Nicole deems "slutty." Alicia, pretending to help Nicole find out whether Chase really loves Nicole, vamps him almost out of his shoes, slaps him, and then tells Nicole what happened. Nicole is wise enough to know what Alicia was up to. Dave is an awkward, unassured boy who hangs out with Chase and Ray, even though he and Ray bicker constantly. He is a sad figure, never sure of



where he stands with anyone, eager to be helpful, and a reluctant coconspirator with Chase and Ray in their pranks. In spite of his participation in rolling the automobile tires in the hall between classes, he seems to take school seriously and is actually afraid of being suspended, something that seems to matter only a little to Chase and Ray—explaining himself to his father is a routine chore that Chase dreads but missing school does not bother him. When Chase lets Nicole remake him into her dream date (hence Alicia's quip "Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date"), Dave resents how easily Chase slides into membership in the in-crowd, exploding the most honest words of anyone in the novel. In spite of their bickering, Dave and Ray care about each other. When Ray is arrested Dave keeps track of what happens to him. Ray always seems a little bit absent from the world, as if his mind is only partly paying attention; Mr. Rope checks his and Chase's eyes but cannot remember whether the pupils should be bigger or smaller if someone is on drugs. People seem to always suspect that Ray abuses drugs, but Chase says that he has never known Ray to take them. This changes when Ray, worried about a driving examination, joins the "stoners" and smokes marijuana to calm himself, and Chase sees him. Ray offers Chase a chance to smoke, which Chase declines. Later Ray is arrested for driving the wrong way on a freeway and for being high on LSD. He is a sad figure—an intelligent person possibly done in by an unpleasant home life.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why would people lie about whether or not someone had asked them out for a date?
2. How are Nicole and Chase going to handle the new reality that their parents are living together?
3. How likely is it that Nicole's mother and father are bitterly divorcing because her father likes to patronize a strip club?
4. What could possibly be going on in their breakup that neither of Nicole's parents will tell her why they are divorcing?
5. The novel barely mentions schoolwork, a major element of high school life. Nicole says she breezes through her homework in minutes, and classes seem to take place, but the main characters are preoccupied by other matters. Are classes not the center of a high school's activities? Why leave them out of a novel about high school students?
6. Why does Chase go to the prom by himself? What does he mean when he says he is not afraid to have people staring at him as he walks down the carpet?
7. Do many people have Ray's attitude that alcohol is bad for driving, but that marijuana is okay?
8. Why would Dave be a designated driver for people who mess up his car and regard him with contempt?
9. Why is being part of the in-crowd important to some people? Why is it not important to others? What are the benefits of being a member of the incrowd?
10. Is being popular important? 11. How should someone deal with a friend who frequently borrows money and never pays it back? Is Chase's attitude the best one?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The ending of *Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date* leaves an opening for a sequel, so write one. How do Nicole and Chase cope with their own love for each other and the prospect of their respective mother and father living together (no one mentions marriage)?

2. What goes into planning a prom?

How are bands hired? Where do the decorations come from? Where does the money come from? How is a budget planned? Who finds the chaperons?

3. How many students attend school while stoned? How many become stoned while at school? Is this a significant problem, or are "stoners" just harmless people who hide together during breaks?

4. Are teenagers driving while on drugs much of a problem in the United States? What does law enforcement say? What do sociologists say? What damages do such teenagers cause?

5. Chase is a prankster, making him annoying, but he seems to do no significant harm. How do high schools handle cutups and pranksters?

6. *How I Changed My Life* features De Vine, who shows up in *Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date*. Read *How I Changed My Life*, then compare De Vine in that novel to De Vine in the next one. Do you like what has become of her? Is she a better or worse person than before?

For Further Reference

Strasser, Todd. "I Was a Teenage Boy."

Media and Methods 19 (1983): 10-12.

Strasser talks about how he tries to attract young readers to his books.

———. "Stalking the Teen." Horn Book 62 (1986): 236-239. Strasser explains how he keeps his writings up to date by researching the behavior of contemporary teenagers.

———. "Todd Strasser." In *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*. Edited by Don Gallo. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990, pp. 203-205.

Strasser discusses his experiences when he was a teenager.

Related Titles

The events in *Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date* take place in the same town and high school as the events of *How I Changed My Life* (1995). In *How I Changed My Life*, a chubby, unpopular girl, Bo Vine, and a football player try to find new personas for themselves that will make them happier and more comfortable with their self-images. Bo Vine insists on being called De Vine and loses weight. She makes brief appearances in *Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date* but has little to do with the novel's characters and plot.



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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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